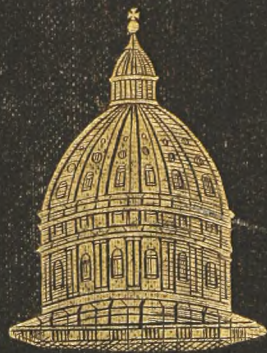
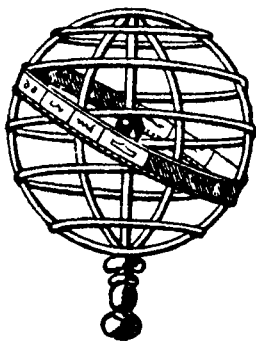


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BY

GERTRUDE FORDE

Author of

"A LADY'S TOUR IN CORSICA," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—A RASH VISIT	1
II.—AMONGST THE MASQUERS	38
III.—NEWS FROM THE CAPE	57
IV.—THE SIGNOR CONTE, AND THE SIGNOR CONTE'S MAN	68
V.—TIMELY RESCUE	85
VI.—TWO DIAMOND-DIGGERS	106
VII.—REVENGE DELAYED	130
VIII.—A RUDE AWAKENING	146
IX.—THE ASSASSIN	161
X.—AN UNEXPECTED LEGACY	182
XI.—ALONE IN THE PALAZZO	206
XII.—INO'S LETTER—A MISSION FULFILLED	217

IN THE OLD PALAZZO.

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CHAPTER I.

A RASH VISIT.

AUTUMN had now come and gone, bringing in its train the usual crowd of migratory English and Americans; amongst them the Morses, mother and daughter, who, with a couple of friends, picked during up their summer travels, returned once more to their rooms at the top of the Palazzo Carbone.

With the cool season came life and bustle and variety, and Madame Scalchi's flat once more re-echoed to the sound of bright voices and the tread of active feet. The return of her American acquaintances was a source of real pleasure to Benedetta, for the silence and solitude of the summer months had in truth been somewhat oppressive to one so

young; and day by day, as the acquaintance ripened, she found greater amusement in the society of her new friends. Her pale cheeks and languid air had departed with the fierceness of the summer heats; the soft glow of health once more filled her cheeks, her eyes lit up with their old animation, and she sometimes carolled a song to herself as she moved about the Maestro's room, putting here and there little touches of comfort and refinement which suggested themselves instinctively to her mind, but which would certainly not have occurred to the stout and irascible old landlady, who, before the girl's advent, had the charge of Cortauld and his apartment, more to his discomfort than to his advantage. But, although Benedetta delighted, as was natural, in the society of young and accomplished friends, and though sometimes at their request she accompanied them to places of public resort, or spent an hour or two chatting, singing or reading in their rooms, yet the Maestro was on this account by no means the less cared for. Day by day, indeed, the bond strengthened

between the old man and the young girl. The care-worn face set in its frame of snow-white hair—the face that always smiled at the sound of her footstep and welcomed her coming with a look of tenderness which spread like a ray of sunshine over the tired features—became more and more dear to her. She was willing enough to be with Mrs. Morse and her daughter and their friends, to enjoy their companionship—but all the real interest of her life was learning by degrees to centre itself upon this old man who was at once helpless and dependent upon her as a child, and yet who was a father to her in his thoughtful love and care for her welfare. He was so unselfish, this dear Maestro—thought so much of her girlish pleasures and so little of the lonely hours which he himself, in the enforced inactivity of his blindness and his feebleness, was condemned to spend—his character was so lofty, his disposition, though at times melancholy, so kindly and loving, his imagination so strong and his conversation often so fascinating—he was at once a man so simple and so noble,

so childlike and yet so intellectual, that a few months spent alone with him had convinced Benedetta that another such did not exist. He on his part, perhaps, and may be with truth, was convinced that never had there been a youthful nurse and companion with so light a step, so soft a voice, nor so tender a touch as Benedetta.

And so the autumn had worn away and given place to winter—that clear, exhilarating winter which is often known in Rome, and which is fresh without being exactly cold, bright and sunny; and which, almost before the old year has closed in or the shortest day is reached, begins to put forward promises of a brighter season and a coming spring. It seemed to Benedetta that at this time the Maestro's revived strength failed again somewhat, and that the burden of some care weighed upon him heavily. The new year had scarcely begun before she was made acquainted with the nature of this burden.

“Detta,” said the old man one morning, “I must have a talk with you. It is some

thing rather serious, my child." And his voice trembled a little.

"I knew there was something," she replied lightly; "but with the wisdom of our two heads laid together, dear Maestro, it surely need be nothing serious."

"I fear so," said Cortauld. "It is this, Benedetta. I have just heard from the bank. The sum I had laid by is nearly exhausted. It was but small—I had not been able to save much. It will soon be gone; then there will be nothing left for me but public charity; or," he added more slowly and in an under tone, "starvation."

"Maestro, Maestro, how can you say such things!" she exclaimed; "I am young, I can work for you—you shall not live on public charity. And, as if Ino would ever let you starve!"

"True," said the old man, raising his head, "Ino is a good lad, a generous lad—he would not let me starve."

"Nor I, Maestro. Do you think I cannot find some means of making money for you?"

“No, no, my child, your bright young life shall not be devoted to toil for the benefit of an old man. You must return to your friends in England—they will be good to you and take care of you; the weight of penury and want shall not fall upon your shoulders. I want but little, God knows; and may be Ino will be able to provide for me; though,” he added, “it goes to my heart to take the boy’s earnings. But it will not be for long—it will not be for long,” he repeated mournfully.

But Benedetta was already on her knees beside him, laying his hand against her face with the childish caress that he loved and knew so well.

“Are you losing your senses, Maestro?” she asked, laughter and tears in her voice together. “Do you think I should ever leave you here alone to poverty and solitude, to return to my English friends? You must be joking.”

“You must, you must, Piccola,” he murmured in a half wavering tone, as he fondly stroked her cheek.

“I will not, Maestro ; so, say no more about it. When I was a little helpless thing you took care of me. Now I am going to take care of you. And your child is not so stupid as you seem to think ; never fear but she will find some way before long of bringing in a sufficient income to support our modest wants. For we are neither of us particularly luxurious or greedy, are we, dear Maestro ?”

“It should not be,” repeated the old man sadly.

“It shall be, it must be, till Ino returns. Would you break my heart, Maestro, by sending my body back to England, when my real self would be here all the time ? We will refer it to Ino when he comes. Perhaps then you will go to live with him, and he will be your son, and you will want no one else, and I shall only be in the way. If you both say so then—then, Maestro, I will go ; not before. And why should you mind my trying to do something for my living here in Rome ? It seems to me very probable that work

will have to be my vocation when I return to England. You know, Maestro, I have not enough to keep myself. I do not like living upon charity, even the charity of the kindest of relations; and the idea of work does not depress me at all; it seems to me a glorious thing. Why did you not tell me of this before?" and she pressed her lips tenderly to his forehead. "You must keep no more secrets in the future from your daughter, Maestro."

Benedetta was true to her determination; and that very afternoon—after prolonged reflection in her own little room—reflection which decided her that only in one capacity, namely the musical, would she be capable, by means of giving instruction to others, of putting into execution her plan of earning something—broached the subject to her friends the Morses. This she did quite simply and plainly, without any shyness, explaining the motives which actuated her, and eagerly asking the opinion of mother and daughter as to whether they considered her sufficiently

qualified for such work. Miss Morse entered into the subject with her usual energy and prompt sympathy.

“My dear,” she said, “don’t try to give music lessons. I guess there are as many music masters and mistresses in most big towns as there are pupils to learn. Every girl who wants to be a bit genteel, and thinks herself smart enough to teach because she has been to a cheap school and learnt to play a waltz or two upon some tuneless old piano, sets herself up to be a music-mistress without knowing a note of harmony, or, maybe, a wrong note from a right one. It’s no good your going in for that sort of thing. People can’t tell how much music you know ; but they *can* tell you’ve got a beautiful voice, such a voice as isn’t often heard even in this country of prima donnas and village operas. Let ’em hear your voice, my dear, and they’ll come to you for singing lessons sharp enough. A woman who sings well can’t by any means always teach well, but fools think they can ; and, as the

world's more or less made up of fools, there's not much to stand in your way."

Detta could not help laughing at the somewhat uncomplimentary terseness of her friend's observations; but she decided to adopt the hint and to lay herself out to obtain singing lessons.

"It is a pity now," said Miss Morse, putting up her little double gold eye-glasses, and surveying her companion with a critical and not unflattering air, "that you can't be seen and heard somewhere. That would give you a grand start. You've got a good appearance—just what takes with the public, anyhow; and I shouldn't wonder if some manager would give you a chance at one of the winter concerts going on. You might do worse than try."

But Detta shrank back involuntarily.

"Oh, no," she said, "I could not sing in public yet—not unless I were obliged. I have never sung except before my friends. I am sure I should break down."

“Break down!” echoed Miss Morse scornfully. “Then you’d be a ninny. A girl with your advantages to talk of being shy and breaking down! Why, I reckon if *I’d* those eyes and that voice of yours, I’d turn all New York round my little finger in six months’ time.”

Mrs. Morse and her daughter had a good many acquaintances, more or less intimate, amongst the American colony now wintering in Rome.

They were not backward in sounding the praises of Benedetta’s genius amongst these friends, and it was owing to their influence and recommendation that the young girl succeeded in obtaining three or four pupils, to each of whom she devoted a couple of hours in the week. How happy, how triumphant she was, when, on the departure of her first pupil, her little account was settled—not without some kindly words of commendation—and she brought the sum intact to the Maestro and laid it upon his knee, flinging her arms round his neck in a laughing rapture which

brought the tears to the old man's eyes. How delightfully easy it seemed to Benedetta—this making of money; the work was a positive enjoyment to her, unless the pupil happened to be of a peculiarly obtuse and uninteresting description. It was nonsense to call it toil at all; she was far happier with this useful employment, with the sensation of earning, the knowledge that she was supporting the Maestro, than she had been in her days of idleness and inaction, when nothing more engrossing than her occasional marketing, her infrequent letters to her cousin, or the soft slippers which she was making for the Maestro's use, filled up her time and occupied her thoughts.

But Benedetta was very young; and, like most people of youth and inexperience, inclined to count her chickens before they were hatched, and to live in the present rather than the future.

The loss was great to her when, in the month of February, her kind and genial American acquaintances left the Palazzo and the neighbourhood of Rome.

They had already remained longer than they intended in the Eternal City, and had arranged to spend the rest of the winter, or rather the advancing spring, at Naples—the ragged, the picturesque, the lovely, and the ill-drained.

Soon after their departure two more of Detta's pupils and Miss Morse's friends dropped off, also moving southwards; and although two or three still remained, yet these would be leaving shortly, and there seemed at present no prospect of further introductions or new pupils.

Detta began to set herself seriously to work to think out some other means by which it might be possible to earn something.

More than once Miss Morse's hint recurred to her mind; and she resolved at last to act upon it, putting off the attempt however in her nervousness from day to day, until at length her last pupil had left, and she had no longer anything to do. The expectation of Ino's speedy return was perhaps an additional inducement to her to

adjourn the evil day; he would be able to advise her upon the point, and, if he thought it a wise thing for her to do, would doubtless get her an introduction to some theatrical manager or local musician of repute, smoothing the way for her by opening negotiations and being himself present at her first interview. Her mind was full of all this when one morning Bettina (who, true to her prediction, had returned some weeks ago to assist her aunt in the winter season), brought in the expected letter addressed in Ino's delicate handwriting and laid it on Benedetta's knee. The outside cover was directed to herself, but the sheet within was to the Maestro.

This was Ino's usual course of proceeding, and was intended to show that the letter, which could only reach the blind man by means of his companion, was equally indited for both. But in fact, Raffae-lino had so far forgotten his short insight into the liberties and privileges of English social life, and returned to the prejudices of

his own country that it would probably have required an event of no ordinary importance to move him to the familiarity, the great breach of etiquette, of a letter addressed personally to a young lady

On the present occasion his news was a subject for disappointment to both his friends.

The chance of a new commission had just offered itself—a chance which it would be foolish to miss, and which might probably delay his return to Rome for another couple of months. It might be that, or it might be longer; but at any rate he could not now hope to see them before Easter

Then followed some details of his work and of his patrons; and the letter closed with a brief notice of the one or two money notes which he enclosed—a little gift sent to the Maestro by his ‘loving son’—and which he begged the signorina would be so kind as to lay out as she thought best, for his comfort and benefit.

Benedetta gathered up the papers with something not unlike a sigh of relief. Here,

at any rate, was a temporary suspension of the dread of absolute want; but O, how much better it would have been for them had Ino come himself! She felt assured that he was quite unconscious of the condition of Cortauld's finances; the Maestro had always been reticent upon money matters as upon other topics; and it was more than probable that Ino was, as she herself had been, under the belief that the old man possessed some small income, which, although meagre, yet was sufficient to stave off positive need. She counted the money over, and began at once to calculate how far, with the most extreme and judicious prudence, such a sum could be made to go in household expenses. Her smooth brow was puckered with anxious thought, as she sat deliberating, too much absorbed in her monetary calculations to notice or even hear the softly spoken words of her old friend.

"God be thanked," he was saying in a murmur to himself, "that the boy has remembered us—for her sake, not mine."

And, in the look of tenderness which

crossed his face, it would be difficult to say which of the two, Ino or Detta, had the greater part.

A few mornings later, Benedetta took her resolution. She would brave the ordeal and seek an interview with a certain musician whose name she well knew as the promoter and conductor of a course of concerts that had been given in Rome, that, and the two preceding winters. It was no good delaying any longer for the sake of Raffaelino's support and encouragement, that was clear ; and the sum he had sent, though an assistance, would require very considerable augmentation even to last them through the short period before his promised return. With a beating heart, therefore, and cheeks flushed by nervousness, and without hinting a word of her intentions to the Maestro, she made her way an hour or two later to the street in which lived the great man whose decision would send her home again joyful with triumph or humiliated by failure. She had not far to go, and on ringing the bell at the entrance to the piano where were the apartments of the musician,

did not know whether to feel most relieved or overcome on the information that he was at home. She was kept waiting a moment or two in the corridor, whilst her name and request were delivered by the servant, and then was ushered into a large untidy room full of papers, and smelling strongly of smoke, having one occupant, a middle-aged man of stout and florid appearance, who, upon her entrance, rose from a davenport where he had been writing, and, making her a slight bow, fixed a pair of very piercing eyes upon her confused countenance. He himself remained standing, but motioned her with brisk courtesy to a chair beside the window

“What can I do for you, signora?” he enquired, as Benedetta paused a moment to gather courage for her appeal; and the colour on the girl’s cheeks intensified itself as the title struck upon her ears, and she realised that this man, a Roman and a bachelor, addressing her as a lady, instinctively supposed that she could not so far have outraged the social etiquettes as to come without the

escort of a servant to his apartments, unless a married woman. Benedetta in her anxiety had never thought of this, but the perception of the fact added perhaps a little stiffness to her manner, when at length she had collected herself sufficiently to be able to speak. She put her request briefly, and awaited the answer in silence. In fact there was but little to say, and the object of her visit could be summed up thus—she believed she had a voice, and she desired to be put in a way of earning something by means of her voice.

“Ah!” said her companion, drily, “I not infrequently have visits from young ladies on a like mission. No disparagement to you, signora, but a great many persons have voices who cannot sing.”

Exactly Miss Morse's words! His manner was not encouraging; nevertheless, it was respectful, and he treated her, Benedetta felt, as a lady, though perhaps a foolish one.

“The question is easily settled,” he continued, crossing the room towards a grand piano which stood in one corner and opening it; “I could judge best if the signora would

kindly give me a specimen of her vocalisation."

Then as she rose and began pulling off her gloves with fingers that trembled somewhat, and proceeded to seat herself before the piano, he sank down upon his chair, with an air of but half-concealed weariness, to listen to her performance.

Politeness and the infinitesimal chance of discovering some star of real magnitude, necessitated his undergoing this oft-repeated and tiresome ordeal; it was also the easiest method of getting rid of the importunate, the over self-estimated, or the ill-advised young women who formed the majority of those who came to him on such like errands. As Benedetta began to sing, however—her voice at first scarcely firm or clear enough, but gradually rising to its accustomed strength and passionate vibration—the stout man metaphorically pricked his ears, and began to sit upright, fixing her with his bead-like eyes and following every note with attention. As soon as she had concluded, remaining for a moment with her back still turned towards

him, half afraid to move and meet his omnipotent fiat, he rose, without a word of commendation or comment of any kind, and placed before her a sheet of music. "Can you read music?" he enquired. "Kindly sing me this." It was a bravura song from some Italian opera, requiring execution and finish; by no means easy of performance even after study, and a decidedly tough subject to be attempted at a moment's notice. Nevertheless Benedetta, now warmed to her work, and determined not to fail through cowardice, nerved herself boldly to the effort; acquitting herself, considering her youth and the nature of the song, very fairly well, although, as she herself was painfully conscious, not without several incorrect notes and a perceptible degree of slurring over the more difficult passages. This ordeal over, her companion bowed politely, motioning her once more to the chair she had before occupied, and seating himself beside her. This was a good sign, Benedetta hoped; and, indeed, the conductor had intended it to be such; yet his words, when at

length he spoke, were a cruel disappointment to her.

“Fair, very fair for a beginner. You are quite right, signora, you have a voice; and, what is better, you are not afraid to open your mouth and to use it. With care and perseverance you can make something of your organ. But you require training—considerable training—before you would be fit to appear as a public singer; you need more smoothness and rapidity of execution, your shakes are execrable, and your voice is your master and not your servant. You must correct all this. Put yourself under the Signora Nobili’s tuition for six months. Then return to me, and I will see what I can do for you.”

Benedetta dropped her veil over her face to hide the chagrin which she felt was plainly expressed there. What was the good of his talking of six months to her—six months under the training of a fashionable and expensive teacher? She who wanted to make money at once—how could she afford to spend lire by the hundred in taking lessons

from such a person, even with the hope of thereby ensuring future gain ? She bowed as she briefly thanked the musician for his opinion and advice, and departed ; leaving him in doubt as to how far she intended to follow his instructions, or how far his candidly expressed judgment was a matter of disappointment or congratulation to her.

It was not until the outer door had clanged upon her that Detta paused again upon the stone staircase, allowing the full tide of mortification to sweep over her, and debating within herself drearily as to whether there might possibly be any other way by which she might attain her end, or indeed, earn remuneration by any means. She vaguely determined, as she passed out into the noisy street, that she would not allow one failure to dissuade her from her purpose. But how to carry it out ? She was sorely disinclined to return home unsuccessful, and she could not seek the Maestro's advice upon the matter.

This morning's business should, she had

resolved, he kept a secret from the too tender-hearted and sympathetic old man.

Presently she found herself in the Via Nazionale, gazing absently into the windows of a picture dealer's shop. She was still standing there when a sudden thought, like an inspiration, darted through her brain. Might she not obtain employment as an artist's model? And, without pausing a moment to reflect, she entered the shop. Had she allowed herself time for consideration it is probable that, notwithstanding her youth and inexperience, Detta would have hesitated to act upon this new idea; but something—was it proud determination or despair, or a feeling approaching to self contempt?—prompted her to take action without a moment's delay. In another five minutes she was on her way to the studio of an artist whose address she had obtained from the picture-dealer. She could not have precisely told why it was that, out of several names supplied to her, she chose the only English one. The address given was not at any great distance, and she arrived at the

door in a few minutes, without having paused a moment to deliberate on her errand. When, however, she had reached the entrance, and the name of the artist, "Arthur Cornisch," inscribed above the brass bell, stared her in the face, a sudden terror took possession of her, and she was tempted then and there to return home mere quickly than she had come. While standing in nervous deliberation, a trembling voice struck upon her ear, and turning, she saw an old beggar standing beside her. "Charity!" he said, "charity, for the love of God!" His hair and beard were white, his shoulders were bent; and, whether a worthy object of charity or no, there was little doubt that he was a feeble one. Something about his face and figure reminded Detta of the old man she had left at home, and her compassion was moved. It seemed to her warm young heart a terrible thing that the aged and infirm should be left to seek their living in the streets through the uncertain benevolence of passing wayfarers. Poor as she was, she placed half a dozen soldi in his hand, feeling her resolution strength-

ened and her hesitation put to flight by the sight of the withered features. She shuddered as she thought to herself that ere many weeks were over, supposing that anything were to happen to Ino, and supposing that she were to fail in finding remunerative occupation, the Maestro might be equally homeless, equally dependent upon the charity of the public; and the vision of the face she loved rose up before her, taking the place of the old beggar-man. She turned hurriedly in at the door-way, whilst the recipient of her bounty was still engaged in the voluminous blessings which are the common expression of his class and his country under like circumstances

“God in Heaven, Holy Mary, and all the Saints bless the mother that gave birth to such as thee!” &c., &c.

A few steps led up to the artist's door, which was opened to Detta by a man-servant in his shirt sleeves, who, in answer to her enquiry for his master, disappeared into a room half-way down the corridor, leaving open the outer door. There appeared to be

two people in the room he entered, conversing with each other in English, whilst the servant was addressed in Italian; and Benedetta was an involuntary auditor of their remarks.

“A lady, Lorenzo?” enquired a British-sounding voice; “what sort of a lady?”

“A young lady, signor.”

“English or Italian?”

“Italian, signor. Of that I am certain.”

“And by herself? What the dickens,” he added, suddenly relapsing into his native tongue, “can she want?”

“Come to see your renowned studio, mon cher—perhaps to give you a grand order,” remarked another voice with a strong French accent.

“Well! show her in, Lorenzo—sharp! (Throw away that confounded cigar, Francillon)! ”

“I hasten to distance myself, Cornishe, my friend; I would not interfere with your little amusements. But you are a sad fellow—at your time of life!”

“Rubbish! I’ve no secrets; you needn’t go, Francillon.”

“Ah! but I must. Parbleu! it is two o'clock, and my model will be waiting.”

By this time Benedetta, preceded by Lorenzo, had reached the door of the apartment and was ushered in. She found herself in the presence of two men, one elderly and English, with an open, kindly countenance, and a shock of grey hair and beard; the other a dapper-looking Frenchman some years his junior, with coal black eyes and moustache. It was a comfortable, untidy room; biscuits and a bottle of light wine stood upon the table, and the ends of two cigars lay smouldering before the stove. Both men bowed as she entered, and remained standing waiting for her to speak. Never in her life before had Detta found it so difficult to do this. This was a far more terrible visit than the one she had just paid; and her confusion increased as she saw the increasing curiosity in the four eyes fixed upon her.

“Adieu, mon cher,” said the Frenchman, as he took up his hat, not unnaturally attributing the embarrassment of the visitor to the presence of a third person, and opining that

she had some communication of a private nature to make to his companion.

Benedetta perceived his delusion, and before he reached the door, had hurriedly stated the nature of her errand. She instinctively felt rather than saw the astonishment it created; and reflected that probably models as a rule came from a lower class, and were less lady-like in appearance than herself. This fact might also, she thought, account for the subtle change of manner immediately apparent, or so she fancied, in her auditors, and the less respectful way in which they turned their gaze upon her.

“I’m afraid,” said Mr. Cornisch, rather drily, “that, so far as I am concerned, you have had your trouble for nothing. I’m not in any want of a female model at present.”

Meanwhile, the Frenchman had returned a few paces into the room, and after staring at Benedetta whilst his friend was speaking with a fixity which made her two cheeks burn like coals, had scribbled something on a bit of paper.

“There’s my address,” he said. “You can come to me to-morrow at twelve and I’ll see you.”

Mr Cornisch glanced towards him, at the same time making some remark in an undertone in English.

“Why not?” asked his companion.

“Why not? Why, because the girl has the face of a Madonna, not of a heathen goddess of small repute.”

The reply was a shrug of the shoulders and a short laugh, as the French artist turned on his heel and left the room. Benedetta was about to follow him, feeling that the short interview was already over; and half afraid, from the Englishman’s manner, that he regarded her call in the light of an intrusion, when the voice of Mr. Cornisch suddenly arrested her steps.

“Stop a moment,” he said. “You understand English, signorina?”

“Yes,” she replied, still, however, in the Italian tongue, and feeling an instinctive desire to keep to herself the secret of her nationality. “How did you know that?”

“By your face just now when I talked of you. If you’ll allow me, I’ll speak English now. I can’t get along so well in that sugary Italian.”

Benedetta bowed her head in silence, wondering what was coming next.

“Look here,” said Mr. Cornisch, speaking in a somewhat gruff, abrupt tone, at variance with the expression of his face; “you are new to this business, aren’t you?”

“I have never been a model before,” she replied.

“You are a lady,” he said, fixing his eyes upon her, “young and pretty; and well educated I should imagine, from your speech and manner; what on earth induced you to try this trade of all others?”

There was a short pause; and then Benedetta raised her beautiful dark eyes, shining with the light of truth, to his, and answered simply:

“For the same reason that induces most people to work—want of money.”

“Are you so poor?” he asked. “You don’t look like it.”

She turned her head away for a moment.

“Those I love are poor,” she said in a low voice, moved involuntarily, notwithstanding his bluntness of manner, to a sort of confidence in the man before her.

He was silent for several seconds.

“Well then,” he said at length, “go and scrub floors—take a broom and sweep streets—but don’t try to be an artist’s model!”

Benedetta raised her wondering gaze again to his. Why did he speak to her after this strange fashion, with such a harsh, energetic ring about his voice? Notwithstanding the varied scenes of her life, both Italian and English, she was a strangely ignorant girl in many things.

“You,” he repeated, “a Roman young lady, a virtuous girl—what are you thinking of? Good heavens, child!” he exclaimed, waxing more eloquent as he went on, “give up this mad idea, and take to any other trade. Such as you are not of the stuff to make models. God forgive me that I run them down, poor things; they work hard enough

for their living, and we couldn't get on without them."

Benedetta's eyes were lowered, and he saw them fixed upon the piece of paper which she was turning round and round between her fingers, and guessed her thoughts.

He moved suddenly, and taking a sketch out of a portfolio that stood near, tossed it on to the table.

"That's the outline of Francillon's new picture," he said; "a rough sketch. If you're wanted at all, it will be for that."

Benedetta gave one glance towards the little pencil sketch.

Then the paper fell from her hands, as she sprang up, as if stung by some noisome reptile—neck, ears and face covered with a burning blush that made her very eyes smart with a sense of physical pain. She could not, would not, wait another moment in the room—she must get out into the open air. She felt stifled in the presence of this man, whose well-meant but blunt revelations had shocked and startled her with an indescribable horror, and whose eyes she dared not

meet, as, almost without parting salutation, she hurried out. She was so quick that she had reached the entrance gate before either Lorenzo or his master could overtake her, and almost before Mr Cornisch had realised the fact that she was going. Here, however, whilst she was fumbling for the fastening, the artist rejoined her; and as he let her out, laid a not unkindly hand upon her arm.

“I have distressed you,” he said. “All the better for you—you will thank me for it some day. Take this—it is a small trifle to go towards helping ‘those you love.’”

And with a perceptible softening of the rough voice, he endeavoured to push something into her hand. But she scarcely heard his words, as, avoiding both his glance and his outstretched hand, she escaped past him out into the street, hurrying homewards with her head bent down and her heart filled with bitter humiliation.

How thankful she was to find herself

once more in her own little room, and to fling herself down beside the bed, wearied out in body and mind, and relieve herself by a burst of passionate tears.

So absorbed was she in her own trouble that she was deaf to the tap that presently came to her door, and even to the sound of Bettina's light footstep entering.

"Dio mio! What is this?" exclaimed the handmaiden in dismay; "the signorina in tears! Ah, what is it?"

Somewhat ashamed of her weakness, but too utterly tired and dispirited to care much about hiding her grief from Bettina, Detta rose, and wiping her eyes, seated herself wearily in a chair.

"Poverina, poverina!" ejaculated Bettina, lifting up her hand and gently smoothing it; "what has gone wrong with you? Are you fretting after the tall, fair Englishman, or is it the signor Ino that has given you a heartache? Or, may be, some impertinent fellow has been rude to you in the street?"

“Neither, Bettina,” she replied, moved to a languid smile by the characteristic nature of the inquiry.

“Then what is it, signorina? And why have you been out all the morning—all these long hours without coming home? I have never seen you weep before.”

“It is nothing, Bettina—only foolishness; you would not understand it.”

“I, too,” said Bettina, looking at her lovingly, “can be foolish at times. I was very foolish—ah, very sad, when I bid good-bye to my cousin Carlo last autumn.”

“What, you, Bettina—who think so little of the men?” asked Detta, beginning to recover herself, and roused by this novel admission on the part of the Tuscan girl.

“Ah, signorina! but Carlo is not as other men!”

From which it will be seen that Bettina was as illogical as most of her sex; and that undeviating adherence to any fixed principle is not possible to the ordinary female intelligence.

“The signor,” she continued, “has been quite unhappy about you. He asked me why you did not come in to the mid-day meal. ‘Oh,’ said I, ‘she is gone to the Vatican; it is free there to day, and we all know how the signorina forgets the hours when she is among pictures or statues!’”

“But, Bettina, how could you tell him such a story? Don’t you know it is wrong to tell lies?”

“Ah, Dio mio! if one may not tell a little lie just to make an old man happy! That is surely no sin. But come in now quickly to him—he has already heard your step. Here, signorina, is the water to wash your face. And, when you have eaten some food and consoled the signor, and feel well again, you must tell your faithful Bettina what has distressed you. You should not go about the streets alone; you are too young and pretty by far, signorina mia.”

CHAPTER II.

AMONGST THE MASQUERS.

IT wanted but two days to Ash Wednesday. The Roman Carnival was at its height, the mad riot and revelry increasing hour by hour in boisterous merriment. Detta was leaning out of a side window; whither she had been invited by Bettina to gaze upon the passers-by, and to amuse herself with the distant view of that small portion of the Corso which it commanded.

The two girls had been laughing merrily at the various strange costumes that passed beneath, and it must be confessed that Detta had felt a momentary longing to enter into the gay throng and take her share of the fun going on.

“Look here, signorina,” said Bettina, displaying with great pride two little black

satin masks ; “ these are for you and me to wear this afternoon ! A little later, when Aunt Scalchi has done the day’s work and scolding, we will put them on and creep downstairs. Giacomo will be waiting about for me at five o’clock, and I told him that I should bring the signorina and that he must take great care of her.”

“ Oh, Bettina, I dare not ! ” said Benedetta ; in a hesitating voice, however, and regarding the seductive little bits of black satin with longing eyes.

“ Che, che ! ” said Bettina ; “ there is no harm whatever, and nothing to frighten you. No one would hurt you, were you by yourself ; and I wager that with Giacomo by they will scarcely even dare to speak to you. He is a fool, is Giacomo ; but he is as big as any man in Rome, and as strong as an ox. That is all he is good for—to take care of one in a crowd.”

Benedetta had not made any further attempts in the matter of earning her living. She had received too great a shock on the occasion of her visit to the English artist ;

and had determined with sorrowful humility that she was too foolish and inexperienced to be able to start herself in any active career. Many good things would shortly happen. The little sum due to her quarterly would be arriving; and in a few days now Ino would surely return.

She had an instinctive faith in Ino's superior wisdom, and in his power to set all troubles straight.

He was but poor himself as yet, but he had experience and he had friends; he would be able to find out for her some means by which she might earn enough to keep the Maestro and herself from want. Meanwhile it was strange that he had not written. Could he again be delaying his return? That would be a serious matter.

Here a shout of light-hearted mockery from the street below caused Benedetta to resume her occupation of peering through the open window. When at length she drew back and returned towards the corridor, she paused astonished at the sounds which smote upon her ear.

They were sounds common enough, being nothing more than the high-toned ravings of Signora Scalchi's harsh voice ; but the quarter from whence they issued, namely the Maestro's room, was a new and unexpected one. Benedetta entered hurriedly, and stood aghast at the scene before her

Signora Scalchi was standing in the middle of the room, the fingers of her large brown hand extended towards the Maestro, whilst the many-coloured silk handkerchief which she wore upon the top of her head vibrated with the energy of her loud passion.

“So you have told me times and times again!” she was saying as the girl entered. “It is always ‘I will pay you next week or next month.’ But it shall go on no longer. I will have my money or you go. Have you no shame to cheat an honest woman out of her due? Here is six months owing. I can wait no longer; those that have no money should go out into the streets and beg, and not take the bread out of the mouths of hard-working people.”

To all this the Maestro answered never a word. His head was sunk upon his breast ; and, save for a little nervous movement of the long fingers, he might have been deaf to the stormy flow of invective. Benedetta crossed the room with quick steps and stood beside his chair, leaning her hand upon his shoulder, and confronting the angry woman with eyes full of silent indignation.

“And you,” said Signora Scalchi, suddenly pointing her guns towards the new-comer, “you’re young and strong enough, aren’t you? Why don’t you go and work?” she shrieked, with coarse vehemence, “instead of idling about all day wasting your time? Or why don’t you write to some of those fine friends of yours”—(an allusion probably based upon the solitary appearance of Beresford Conway at the Palazzo)—“and get them to send you some money?”

But before Benedetta had time to frame any reply to this sally, Bettina suddenly appeared upon the scene, her cheeks almost as crimson and her eyes almost as flashing as those of her aunt.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, turning upon the latter with astonishing vivacity. “How dare you make all this noise, and come and insult gentlefolks in their own room?”

“It’s not their room, it’s mine!” screamed Signora Scalchi. “And you, you good-for-nothing hussy, what do you mean by ordering me about? I’ll turn you out of my house.”

“Altro,” sneered Bettina, “there are twenty houses *I* might go to; but not another girl in Rome who would stop with *you*, you cross-grained old toad! Leave the signor alone, and the signorina too, I tell you. They will pay you all in good time. And, as for your rooms, no one would come to them if it were not for me. If the signor and the signorina go, I go too. Cospetto! why,” continued Bettina, whose characteristic virtue was certainly not an excess to humility, “the Signore Morse would not have come back had I not been here—they told me so.”

The flow of Bettina’s eloquence could on occasions rival or even excel that of her aunt; and she now continued her uncomplimentary

remarks with such determined vigour and with so little apparent necessity for a pause in which to take breath, as to over-ride even her stouter relative, whom she fairly drove before her out of the room.

This victory she achieved in the course of a few moments, Benedetta and the Maestro remaining silent auditors of the domestic combat. When, however, both had left the room, the angry war continuing as they made their way towards the kitchen, Benedetta closed the door softly and returned to her companion's side. For several moments neither of them spoke. Detta was still trembling with indignation at the onslaught which had been made upon the helpless old man, whilst he sat wrapped in painful thought, heavy lines gathered upon his forehead. At last he rose and walked towards the corner of the room where lay his violin case, bringing it back in his arms to where she stood.

“Benedetta,” he said in a low voice that had an unnatural ring about it, “this must go. It will stop that woman's mouth. It is worth a thousand lire.”

But she shrunk back as if he had offered her a serpent. "Oh no, Maestro!" she exclaimed, "that shall never be. We will find some other means. Ino will be back in a few days; and I—I also shall have some money soon."

"Ino may delay; and he is poor, like us," he said in the same tone. "And there are other debts—you forget——"

But the tears had risen to Benedetta's eyes, and she pushed back the case from her, pleading earnestly. "Not the violin, Maestro—I have my watch."

"It would not be enough," he said; "besides, shall I rob you? No, this must go. May be some day I may get it back. Moroni will dispose of it for me." And he put the case down beside him, taking out the instrument with trembling fingers. "Not you, my child; you shall not do it. I will wait a few hours; Moroni will be here this evening." Then his face fell suddenly upon his bowed hands as they rested on the table in front of him, and Benedetta heard him mutter in a tone whose despair went

to her heart, "Oh ! my God ! has it come to this ? "

He seemed for once almost unconscious of her presence ; and unable to bear the sight of his anguish, she left the room. Something must be done, and that quickly ; it would kill the old man to part with his violin—the cherished instrument that for years had been to him as a favourite child, soothing him in hours of sorrow, conversing with him in hours of loneliness, and for ever bringing a train of fresh, bright dreams—dreams of a better world than the one in which humanity toils and loves, quarrels and cheats—into the dim dreariness of his long night.

Once more she returned to the unoccupied room where she and Bettina had laughed together so merrily but a few minutes before. On the table still lay the two black satin masks. The sight of them inspired Detta with a sudden idea. She took up one of the masks and tried it on. It fitted closely round her face, leaving nothing visible save the mouth and chin, and the eyes gleaming through the two apertures. She tore it off

again, glancing through the open window for a moment; then stood debating, whilst the colour went and came on her smooth round cheek. The debate did not, however, last many seconds; after which she proceeded to her own room, hastily donned a wrap, and, with the mask still in her hand, closed the outer door behind her softly and hurried down the staircase. A step or two from the bottom she paused, and put the black satin upon her face; then, darting rapidly out, passed the open doorway of the concierge's room. She walked down the street quickly, looking neither to right nor left, until she had almost reached the corner of the Corso. There were not many people at the moment at this particular spot, a Polichinello of remarkable wit and acrobatic power having just drawn the crowd in his wake down the main street. One or two more quiet-looking passengers loitered like herself about the corner, apparently intent more upon seeing than being seen; but no one spoke to her nor regarded her with any particular curiosity, as she leant against the wall,

rousing up her courage with a desperate effort. Presently, however, every head was turned and every eye fixed upon the girl. A stream of melody was rising from the little quiet street—a magnificent volume of sound coming from the lips of the tall slight figure dressed all in black with veil upon her head and mask upon her face. At first the voice trembled somewhat; but in a few moments was brought under control, filling the narrow street and penetrating down the Corso in the gay notes of a well-known Neapolitan song. A crowd quickly gathered round; and it is a testimony to the innate love of music in the Italian soul, that, even amid the license of this carnival day, not a person spoke to the singer, or in any way interfered with her during her performance.

The motley crowd formed in a ring, as the full notes rose and fell upon the sunny air; jokes were suspended, all remained stationary, and a perfect silence, interrupted only by the cries which proceeded from the more distant outskirts of the circle, prevailed for several minutes. At the conclusion, the

applause was loud and long. Italians do not stint their praise of music which pleases them.

There were "bravos" and clapping of hands, and cries of "another, another!" from many of those who stood about the girl; whilst the ring widened with new comers, and many and various were the coins and papers flung into the apron which the singer timidly held out for contributions.

"Another, another!" they still shouted; and Benedetta, afraid to refuse, and still more afraid to glance at the sea of faces which surrounded her, started afresh, choosing this time a more solemn and pathetic song—a provincial ditty, which in the days of her childhood she had learnt, from hearing it repeatedly sung by Annunciata when moving about her household duties. It was one better fitted than the former to bring out the best points in the girl's voice; and, whilst rendering it, Benedetta lost her fears, and singing with the full force which she dared not have employed within a room, forgot the crowd around her, save for being conscious of that peculiar exultation which the unspoken

sympathy of any large number of fellow human beings brings to the one beneath whose spell they are for the moment placed. She had not intended this time making any demand upon the public bounty, but the approbation of the crowd forced upon her tangible tokens of their satisfaction; and she found it difficult to escape from the throng of her admirers. At this moment, however, some new excitement appeared upon the scene but a few yards off, and the volatile crowd made a sudden rush in that direction, carrying Benedetta in their vortex. She was trying to escape the pressure and to turn her face homewards, when a voice sounded suddenly close to her ears—

“Come and sing us another song, my pretty one,” it said, “in this café close by. Such a nightingale as thou art is not to be heard every day. Nay, nay, do not run away; I have given thee one gold piece, and I will promise thee half a dozen more if thou wilt tune up there.”

Benedetta gave a hurrid glance in the direction of the speaker. He was a well-

dressed man with a dark dissipated face and evil-looking eyes. Involuntarily she shrank from him; but the press of people round prevented her moving quickly, and the more evident her intention to escape, the greater apparently became his determination to keep her prisoner. He placed himself deliberately in her way, and tried to draw her arm within his.

“Do not be so timid, little one,” he said. “Why, you are quite a coquette! Lift up the corner of that mask, and let me see a face which must surely be beautiful, judging from the eyes and mouth.”

Benedetta's fears increased. She knew the license permitted by the carnival, and she also knew that by the action she had just taken in singing for charity in the open street, she had placed herself in a position which, so to speak, permitted if it did not invite such liberties; but there was something about the manner and look of this man especially repugnant to her, and she felt a genuine fear of him. He did not leave her long in doubt. Strains of music were pro-

ceeding from a doorway close beside them, leading into the street; and although not yet five o'clock in the afternoon, couples might be seen twisting and twirling to the quickly played measures of a popular waltz. Before Benedetta could struggle or resist, her persecutor had thrown his arm around her waist, and with an adroit movement, had crossed the threshold and was whirling her round and round amongst the other couples. To resist would only have been to create a scene, and Benedetta felt it wisest to give way to necessity, and keep step with her partner, making, however, so soon as he paused, another vain attempt to escape.

“Not so fast, not so fast, pretty one,” he said, keeping a firm though not ungentle hold of her arm, as he forced her to walk beside him down the long room; “we must have yet another turn; you dance as transcendently as you sing. Then, if you will but tell me your name, and tear that cruel mask off your face but for one moment, I promise you, on the honour of a gentleman, to let you go. But,” he continued, pressing the

hand that he kept captive within his arm, "why are you afraid of me? Why so timid now when you were not afraid to sing to a street-full of contadini?"

"Let me go, signor; I do not wish to dance again," she pleaded; but his reply was inexorable.

"Nay; not until you give me a sight of the face that belongs to so charming a maiden," and he fixed his eyes upon hers with a bold glance which caused the girl to turn aside her head; as, once more against her will, she was dragged into the midst of the dancers.

They had not gone far, however, when another couple, dancing with more vigour than foresight, cannoned up against them with violence, nearly knocking them over, and loosing the hold of Detta's partner. She recovered herself more quickly than her companion; and by a quick movement freeing herself, darted towards the open door. In another moment she was out in the street, had turned the corner of the Corso, and was flying like the wind in the direction

of the Palazzo. The sound of mocking laughter and running footsteps behind served to increase her pace; and she never paused until, breathless and excited, she reached the top of the long stone staircase. Then she waited a moment to recover her breath and to congratulate herself upon her escape. Her pursuer had not ventured to enter the gateway, and she was now quite safe. After all, there was no great harm done; such freaks were common enough during the Carnival, and she might feel relieved that nothing worse had come of her bold action. And the money—the money was there, safe and real, in her pocket! She had not yet counted it; but it was enough, more than enough, she felt sure, to prevent the terrible sacrifice of the old man's violin. Such a benefit had been well earned at the expense of a few fears and a little annoyance. What a smile would come over the dear face when she laid it in his lap and assured him that his treasure was safe!

She was hastening in, her mask torn off, her eyes smiling and her steps joyful, when

Bettina, with a white startled face and a strange silence, put out her hand as if to warn her from entering the room. A great foreboding came over her as she pushed Bettina aside without a word, and hurried on.

There, stretched out upon the bed, lay the old man, pale and unconscious, supported in Signora Scalchi's arms; whilst a stranger, evidently a medical man, stood beside him. One glance was sufficient to tell Benedetta what had happened; the dread enemy, paralysis, had returned for the second time and stricken his victim —

“Ah!” said Bettina, taking the signorina's hand in hers, “it must have been but a few minutes after you had gone out, when I returned in here to tell you that Aunt Scalchi was sorry for her rough words, and to bid you pardon her incivility. And I found him by himself, the violin between his arms upon the table, and his head fallen across them. I thought he was dead, Ah, Dio! and I fetched the signor medico. It is all the fault of that wicked woman Scalchi. Yet, courage!

signorina, it is but another fit; he will get better."

Signora Scalchi, subdued and terrified, attempted no retort to Bettina's accusations; but Benedetta flung herself beside the bed, sobbing aloud, "It has come too late—too late for him!"



CHAPTER III.

NEWS FROM THE CAPE.

THE next few days were sad and dreary enough, passed in the noiseless solitude of the Maestro's room ; where, for some time, the old man lay without apparent life or motion, and Benedetta kept anxious watch beside him. The loud shouts of the merry Carnival mummers ascended from the street below, and broke strangely across the stillness which reigned at the top of the old Palazzo.

As, with her heart full of tenderest pity and affection, Detta sat beside her old friend, waiting, hoping for some return to consciousness, it seemed to her now a matter of wonderment that she had but a few days before been light-hearted and frivolous enough not only to laugh in sympathy with the senseless antics of the crowd

beneath, but even to look forward with a pleasurable excitement to taking part in the frolics going on.

It was a relief to her when the Carnival came to its abrupt close; and the very people, who a few hours before, dressed as harlequins or as monstrosities, had been careering about the streets like children, pelting each other with confetti, bearing huge lighted candles in their hands, playing off against each other numberless practical jokes of a rough and foolish nature, should now, in sober costume and with decorous countenances, be flocking in crowds to all the churches in Rome, to kneel upon the stone floors with down-bent heads and every expression of abject penitence and self-reproach.

After a few days, however, the old man rallied, and there came a return to consciousness.

Things mended day by day; and before the week was over, the Maestro could not only hear and understand what she said to him, but could also make himself understood by

others. His features were still affected, and his utterance indistinct, but Benedetta nourished a hope that these matters might improve, and that her companion might, at any rate, be restored to his formal mental powers. The doctor, however, assured her that this was the most that could be hoped for. Physically, life was almost over for the old man; one side was too completely paralysed to admit of a chance of restoration, and he would probably remain in bed, a helpless log, for the brief remainder of his days.

It was pitifully sad to Benedetta to see the smile that still crossed the poor drawn features as the Maestro endeavoured to thank her for any little act of attention; and, so soon as it was clear that he had recovered consciousness and felt a comfort in her presence, she refused to leave his side except for necessary sleep.

The day after Cortauld's seizure she had written to Ino; but, much to her astonishment, had received no reply from him. He must have left Florence; he would never have allowed such a communication to remain

unanswered—so devoted as he was to his old friend. Very often Detta found herself longing for his return—for his presence in the sick-room; the lonely responsibility lay so heavily upon her inexperienced shoulders. How she longed for the sound of a friendly voice—for the sympathy of some one who would share her sorrow, and take an occasional part in her anxious watching! And, as if in partial answer to these cravings, there arrived for her, just about this time, a letter from the Cape. She felt a strange thrill of pleasure as she held it unopened in her hand. So, Mr. Conway had not forgotten her, nor the promise he had made at parting, that he should write to her from his new home. And she had felt, as she said her good-byes, that it would by no means be displeasing to her to know that this man, who was to be nothing more than her friend, should still at times think of her and of their friendship. But she had not thought that, after the lapse of so many months, the mere sight of her friend's handwriting would have power to bring the colour into her cheeks and such a sudden

warmth to her heart. If the outside of the letter, however, was sufficient to move and interest her so much, the inside was not calculated to lessen this effect.

Beresford Conway expressed himself in writing as he did in speech, somewhat abruptly and yet deliberately; and the sentiments he enunciated on this occasion were of no uncertain nature, nor did they by any means incline to the line of platonic friendship. The first part of his letter was, however, devoted to the details of his new life. He began by giving Detta a graphic account of the various adventures he had met with, and the numerous occupations he had tried since his landing. He appeared to find considerable relish in the peculiar vicissitudes of colonial life; and there was a vein of humour pervading the description of his novel surroundings which had lain latent during his former more conventional existence. He had been—up to the present date—a railway surveyor, a horse-breaker and a tutor. The latter occupation, which he still held, was the most genteel but the dullest of the three.

The line-surveying was the pleasantest, by reason of change of scene and the constant supply of horses at his command. Still, a certain amount of amusement was to be extracted even from his present calling. His pupils were the family of a rich and aspiring Boer—two young ladies of fifteen and sixteen and a brother of twelve. They were very advanced Boers, and desirous of mingling in English society—the society of the African-ers up country—and his duties were simple, consisting merely in teaching them to read and write in English. The boy, who was the sharpest, was easy enough to manage, as he could be cuffed if he did not attend; but the tuition of the young ladies was somewhat embarrassing, owing to their disposition to burst out giggling on the smallest provocation all through school hours. They were large, fat, flabby-looking girls, said Mr. Conway, with big mouths, and no eyes to speak of; very stupid and very good-natured; and their hands were the most wonderfully huge and awkward mechanism of thumbs that had ever been put together.

Meanwhile he was living at the Boer's house, where the hospitality was great, and all the family looked up to him as a rare marvel of learning and accomplishments. But he was getting rather sick of the shock-headed boy and the pudding-faced maidens, and intended to push on shortly up to Kimberly and the diamond mines. "I wonder," he said, "if all this rigmarole will only bother you? It is rather lonely out here, notwithstanding the novelty of a free active life; so one is apt to grow selfish and force one's self upon the recollection of one's friends. But, from what I saw, I fancy that you also have not many friends in Rome, and so perhaps will be the more likely to put up with these egotistic meanderings. But now to another topic. I suppose I may be very obtuse, as there is no doubt I was always very obstinate; but an absurd idea has for some time had possession of me—that you do not dislike me so utterly as you wish me to understand, and that if I hammer my nail on the head long enough I may perhaps succeed in driving it home. At any rate I shall do

so, as there is nothing to lose by it—at least until I hear there is somebody else more worthy of you.”

For some time after she had finished reading it, the letter lay upon Benedetta's lap, whilst her gaze wandered dreamily out through the window, and she recalled the writer as he stood before her last with the kindly look in his half-sleepy eyes and the protective tone in his slow voice. How long was it since she had found out the real goodness and manliness that underlay Beresford Conway's little affectations? How was it that at first she had felt so callous, so indifferent towards him, and that now, all of a sudden, a great yearning came into her heart as she thought of him? That day when they had sat together on the common, and she had listened to what he had to say with a half-incredulous astonishment—how little she had thought the time would come, not many months hence, when she would look back upon her own repulse with a far greater astonishment and incredulity. How she had misconceived him then! She

had regarded him merely as a good-looking nonentity, pleasant-tempered but shallow; and had not given him credit for one of those strong and generous qualities which she now acknowledged he possessed. How superficial and childish her judgment had been. How happy they might have been if she had said yes to him then.

There was neither poverty nor trouble of any sort at that time to divide them; only her own coldness and want of appreciation. And now he was in Africa, and she in Italy—many thousand miles between them; who could tell if they might ever meet again? He told her that he was obstinate, and she believed it. She believed that he would remain faithful to her, perhaps longer than most men; but, with separation and poverty and distance between them, who could tell what misunderstanding, what danger, perhaps what death might intervene? She had been a fool in rejecting happiness when it lay before her. She had even let him go this last time without the knowledge that her heart was touched; and had striven to make him

believe her as indifferent as before. Thank God, she had not quite succeeded—that he guessed in any fashion at the motive which had induced her to make the effort to deceive both herself and him, and which had led her to fight all this winter against the growing consciousness that she had made a mistake—the increasing longing to see him once more, to retract her words and to tell him that his love was precious to her.

It was often lonely, very lonely—she had few acquaintances and fewer friends in this sunny, brilliant old city of Rome; he was a man strong in mind and body, one whom she could lean upon as well as love, and who would be a protector through life. She rose suddenly with a pain at her heart; and leaning her cheek against the cold window panes, looked over the wide expanse of domes and roofs and turrets, conscious of a strange new yearning.

The tears had risen involuntarily to her eyes; and with flushed cheeks she pressed the letter to her.

“I love him!” she whispered to herself with

an emotion that was chiefly joy. "When will he know it?"

But at the same moment she started, turning quickly, as the sound of a feeble, broken voice came indistinctly from the other end of the apartment.

"Piccola, Piccola mia," it said, "are you there?"

And she hurried towards him, her letter in her pocket; even Beresford Conway forgotten, as she bent above the Maestro, smoothing his pillow, laying a cool hand upon his forehead, and soothing him with gentle loving words.

Ah, it was better so—better that she should be free. Not even for *his* sake, or for the sake of any happiness of her own, would she have given up the tender duty of ministering to the last days of this sad and solitary old man, her father's friend, and her own adopted father.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SIGNOR CONTE, AND THE SIGNOR CONTE'S MAN.

THE next morning was a Sunday, and the bright sunshine was tempting to behold. Benedetta, at any rate, felt it so, and perhaps partly in consequence of the cheering effect of yesterday's letter, made no opposition to Bettina's proposal that she should refresh herself with a turn out of doors. Bettina did not suggest that the signorina should go to church; the poverina was a heretic, and, since she did not attend mass, it was of little consequence whither her steps led her. Indeed it was better, far better, that she should avoid, if possible, that English meeting place, where, in Bettina's opinion, there was neither priest nor acolyte, vestment nor ritual, where the poor heathen entered their church without either crossing or taking the

holy water, and ranged themselves upright in pews as if they had been at the Opera.

“Take a turn down the Corso, signorina,” she said, affectionately pinning a little bunch of early flowers into the bosom of Detta’s dress. “I would go with you if I could, but Aunt Scalchi is cross this morning—crosser than usual; and the new lodgers, the signor and his wife, dine early. But it will do you good to see all the gay costumes. You should go out more. You stop too long in the Signor Cortauld’s room. Now, signorina, one little bunch more in your hat, and you will look charming.”

“No, not in my hat, Bettina. I don’t want to be too fine.”

“Ah! but,” pouted Bettina, “what a hat for a pretty signorina to wear! An old black straw, with just a bow of black velvet. Nasty thing!”

And she gave it an indignant fling across the bed.

But Benedetta resisted this addition to her simple toilet. She had not been out since the last Carnival Tuesday, and she had a nervous

fear of attracting attention, and being recognised by anyone, through her walk or figure, as the masked incognita who had sung that day at the street corner. Oddly enough, however, she had almost forgotten by now the episode of the dance and of her persecutor on that occasion, and had no fears of any unpleasant results in consequence of it. It had been, she fancied, merely a Carnival incident. The Carnival was now over, and people had once more subsided into their sober senses, and it was not likely that she should ever meet this man again. Nevertheless she crept downstairs and out into the open street a little timidly, hurrying with a hot blush past the corner which had witnessed the wild but successful exploit of last week. How beautiful seemed the very streets after her four or five days' incarceration in the gloomy old Palazzo. The soft sweet brightness of early spring breathed about her even here, the sky was as blue as a sapphire, children ran about with baskets full of sweet-scented bouquets, and the sauntering, gaily-dressed crowds elbowed their way with good-humoured smiles that

seemed the natural reflex of the pure atmosphere and the unclouded morning sunshine. The general air of happiness and untroubled gaiety infected Benedetta as she walked along. The fountains were playing in the Piazza del Popolo, and birds were singing merrily from adjacent trees; and as she made her way through the gates (for in those days the English barbarian was not permitted to carry on his depraved cultus within the sacred walls of the most holy Papal city), restrained herself with difficulty from joining in their song.

How perfect life would be under this Italian spring-tide were but Beresford Conway walking beside her, and the Maestro free from care and suffering!

The day was equally lovely, and her heart equally light, when, an hour or two later, the English service over, she was returning through the same Piazza, amid the several groups of her northern countrymen and countrywomen. She walked slowly; for, although it was about the usual hour for the mid-day meal, yet she felt a natural disinclination to return to the chilly silence of

the Palazzo, and to leave the hot, brilliant, sweet-smelling sunshine. She lingered on her way, amusing herself by watching the English couples or parties, as they passed her one by one, feeling a half wonder in the consciousness that she herself belonged to them and to their nation. But in truth, Benedetta, although in appearance so entirely southern, was in thoughts and tastes more English than Italian. She had been a little uncivilised savage when she had quitted Rome seven years ago. All her teaching, her refinement, the formation of her judgment, had been acquired in England under the influence of English lines of thought and morality. Why was it then that she sometimes felt for a time as if the English part of her had merged itself in the old Italian fancies of her childhood ; and was ungrateful enough to look with a strange and critical eye upon these English visitors, none of whom she knew ?

A voice beside her roused her from her dreamy enjoyment with a start of surprise.

“ Good morning, signorina,” it said. “ I

recognised you at once. Ah! you cannot disguise yourself from me”

And turning, Benedetta perceived, to her annoyance, the same man whose attentions had been so unpleasant to her on the Carnival Tuesday

Fancying that it would be best to take no notice of him, she attempted to move on quickly without a word. But her companion was not to be so easily disposed of. He kept pace with her, walking at her side, and continuing to address her in the same tone—one of exaggerated and insolent admiration.

“Ah,” he said, “wherefore so cold, so silent, signorina? It is too cruel to run away from me thus. The moment I saw you across the Piazza, I recognised your light walk, your graceful figure, the perfect outline of your face. There could be no other signorina in Rome like you. Ah, Dio! did not my eyes tell you on Tuesday what my heart experienced at the first sight of you?”

Benedetta had been hurrying forward in

the hope of shaking him off; but, finding that impossible, she paused and glanced around her. A few English still remained in the Piazza, together with a crowd of military, of *contadini*, and of other Italians. But there was no help to be obtained. Neither English nor Italians would see anything remarkable in the fact of a well-dressed man walking beside an Italian signorina (for such Benedetta knew she probably appeared to outsiders). For that matter, she had no fancy to make a scene, under any circumstances, by attracting observation to herself; and the man could do her no harm, however insolent, out here in the open daylight and the crowded streets.

There was more of indignation than of fear upon her face as she turned towards him.

“Signor,” she said, “you appear to be a gentleman. I am a lady, and I do not know you. Be so good as to leave me. I do not wish for your company, and your compliments are unpleasant to me.”

The touch of involuntary scorn in the

girl's manner, the heightened colour on her cheeks, and the flash of anger in her deep dark eyes added greatly to her charm in the eyes of her tormentor. He began to perceive that he had been mistaken in his first estimate of her position, drawn perhaps naturally from her appearance and occupation on the previous Tuesday; and that she probably was, as she stated, a lady. But, on the other hand, she was alone and unprotected, beautiful and bewitching; and Paolo della Coschia was not the man to let slip the pursuit of these advantages on the score either of gentlemanly feeling, chivalry, or an over-strained morality.

"Ah, signorina!" said he, "do not dismiss me thus harshly! I am a gentleman—yes. Allow me to have the pleasure of knowing you and coming to see you."

"Signor," she said coldly, "you know it is not the custom in Italy for gentlemen to call upon unmarried ladies."

"Ah, signorina, your pretty freak at Carnival-time showed you to be above the narrow prejudices of our countrywomen!"

“Leave me, signor,” repeated Detta, with difficulty restraining her anger. “Do you not know that your following me thus is an insult?”

“I am all respect, signorina. I kiss the very dust at your feet. I plead only for one kind word, one kind look from those beautiful eyes.”

Benedetta plunged with the energy of despair amongst the thickest of the crowd that thronged the Corso, without looking behind her; by this means managing to escape for a time from her tormentor. But she was still conscious that he was not far off, and had no sooner turned the corner of the quiet street leading to the Palazzo Carbonegli then she found him once more beside her

She turned towards him, indignant anger flashing from her eyes—roused at length into one of the rare fits of passion which made her look like the little Detta of old, confronting Pippo in one of their childish quarrels.

“How dare you follow me?” she asked.

“You are no gentleman; neither have you any manliness.”

He laid his hand upon his heart with an exaggerated air of polite humility

“Do not be angry with me,” he said; “I can no more resist following you than can the flowers be hindered from turning towards the sun. But I leave you, signorina, since I offend you.”

“You think,” she said, “that because I am alone, I have no one to protect me from insult. But,”—(and she thought of Ino and his promised return)—“even I have friends.”

Her companion appeared quite undisturbed by her scornful indignation.

The bold eyes looked at her if possible more admiringly than before, and there was little reality in the tone of respect with which he replied.

“Happy he who is called friend by the signorina! How much would I undergo to gain such a title! May you some day, signorina, be convinced of the depth and sincerity of my admiration.”

And, lifting his hat with a smile, intended no doubt to be of an ingratiating character, but which to the girl's mind gave a yet more unpleasant look to the dark, well-featured face, he turned away

Benedetta's cheeks were still flushed and her voice still quivering with anger as she re-entered the Palazzo, exciting the curiosity of Bettina, who speedily made herself mistress of all the details of her young signorina's unpleasant adventure.

“ Ah, Dio ! ” she exclaimed, nodding her head and spreading out her hands, “ this comes of young and pretty signorine walking about the streets alone and unattended. If you looked English—yes, all would be well—who would dare to speak to an English mees ? But you—you are an Italian signorina, from head to foot ; no one would think that you were Mees Campbell. So they wonder to see you alone, and they speak to you—the bad signori. And some of the signori in Rome are bad—ah, very bad ! You must not go out again alone, signorina ; you must come with me.”

To this Benedetta felt herself obliged to agree; not caring however to confide even to Bettina the previous episode which had probably brought all this trouble upon her, and which now, in her calmer moments, it was a matter of astonishment to her that she had ever had the boldness to carry out—so mad, though so successful had it been.

For the next few days, therefore, she did not venture to stir out again alone; and, as Signora Scalchi at this time happened to have several temporary lodgers who kept Bettina busily employed, so that she rarely left the Palazzo save on some hurried errand, the time was spent quietly enough in the Maestro's apartment—many an hour being passed in reading aloud to the old man, or in striving to understand the painfully confused words put together with so much difficulty.

She was standing one morning by her open window, looking somewhat wistfully down into the street below, and beyond over the bright, many-tongued city, when Bettina entered her room in hurried excitement, an enormous bouquet in her hands.

“ See, signorina,” she said, “ this is for you. Is it not beautiful ? ” And indeed the flowers were the most magnificent exotics ; and in a moment had filled the air with their heavy perfume.

“ Who sent them ? ” asked Benedetta, a quick flush, certainly not of pleasure, rising to her cheek.

Bettina laughed as she shrugged her shoulders. “ Your admirer, signorina. He is a great man—the Signor Conte della Coschia. His man-servant brought them.”

“ Then,” said Detta, without even glancing at the flowers, “ you may throw them out of that window, and tell the servant what you have done ! ”

“ Ah, signorina,” said Bettina, “ that would surely be a pity ; they are too lovely to be thrown away. And see here,” she continued, advancing towards her companion, “ here is something pinned round the bouquet, of which the man said I was to be very careful. Ah, signorina, it is a little diamond brooch ! Oh, Dio mio ! how beautiful it is ! ” and she held out the glittering jewel

towards the signorina. But Benedetta's eyes met hers with a glance which silenced the hand-maiden, as, with a passionate gesture, she suddenly seized the bouquet out of her hand and flung it ruthlessly through the window. It is more than possible that the diamond brooch might have shared the same fate, had it not been for Bettina's presence of mind.

"Nay," said the Tuscan maiden, firmly clutching the gem, and promptly retiring her outstretched hand, "diamonds are not made to be thrown out into the streets for the benefit of passers by ! You must be mad, signorina Detta ! If you will, return it to the signor ; but do not fling gold jewels about as if they were playthings."

"You are right, Bettina. Take it down to the man again, and tell him to return it to his master."

"Ah," said Bettina, regretfully gazing at the too enticing ornament, "but it does seem a pity to send it away. As for *me*, I keep all the presents they give me ; it troubles me but little. Men are such fools, say I. They must

spend their money on something. Better on an honest girl than on wine or morra or the lottery tickets. And now the Signor Conte will give it to some one else!"

"If that is the case," said Detta, contempt in her tone, but unable to restrain a smile at Bettina's worldly-wise reasoning, "you had better tell him where his bouquet lies, in order that he may make use of that as well. I daresay it is not much damaged."

This appeared to Bettina a joke of the first water; and she disappeared with alacrity to fulfill a commission so pleasing to her own mocking humour. In a few minutes she returned with a sparkle of somewhat angry triumph on her countenance.

"Ah," she said, "he is a nice good-for-nothing that fellow of a servant! 'You don't know my master, the Conte,' he said when I gave him back the brooch with your message; 'I dare not return this to him, he would be furicus.' 'Well,' said I, 'you look like a pretty rogue. I daresay you will find no difficulty in pocketing the

jewel, and making up a lie about it!’ ‘You do not know what he is like,’ he repeated; ‘it is of no use for your signorina to pretend to be so coy. My master always gets his own way in the end; he is one who cares for neither God nor devil.’ ‘That is very likely,’ said I, ‘but he may not get the better of a woman, for all that.’ ‘Ah, signorina,’ he said, ‘how clever you are! Your young lady may be very bewitching; but, were I the Signor Conte, I would prefer the maid to her mistress!’ ‘And why should you think, varlet,’ asked I, ‘that the maid would have anything more to say to you and your Signor Conte than has the signorina?’ And as for me, I have no mistress!’ ‘Ah, mia bella,’ said he, ‘but you will have a master some day to control that saucy tongue of yours! Meanwhile do not forget me.’ And he was for kissing me. But he did not get his kiss. ‘I will give you something to remember me by, since you are so polite,’ said I, and with that, caught him a ringing slap upon the face, and left him rubbing his cheek. ‘Cospetto!’ said he, ‘but you are a little

diavolo ! No fear of my forgetting you, mia bella.' I don't think he will be in such a hurry to make love again ; nor perhaps will the Signor Conte trouble to send you another bouquet."



CHAPTER V.

TIMELY RESCUE.

BETTINA'S prophecy seemed likely to be fulfilled. Some little time passed, and Benedetta heard no more of the Conte or his pushing man-servant. She still was careful to keep to Bettina's escort, and had not again ventured out by herself since that Sunday when he had followed her with such ungentlemanly pertinacity. But as the days wore on and she neither saw nor heard aught more of either master or man, she began to persuade herself that such precautions were no longer necessary—that the Count had accepted the rebuff bestowed upon him, and that this was an isolated unpleasantness not likely to recur. Acting on this belief she presently discarded Bettina's attendance, and returned to her solitary walks on business or

pleasure about the city. No one molested her, and before many days were over the Conte della Coschia had ceased to trouble her mind. Her thoughts, too, were busy this week with the penning of a letter intended for South Africa. She had not promised Mr. Conway a reply when he wrote; but she well knew what pleasure her letter would bring, and could not hide from herself the equal pleasure to be experienced in the writing of it. She had delayed a few days, nay, a week or two, before sending her answer; each day longing to begin, and mentally inscribing to him a different epistle, yet putting off the actual fulfilment from a certain nervousness which made so simple an action assume undue proportions in her eyes. She could not restrain herself from writing, yet in all her life before she had never felt such difficulty over a letter. So much was in her mind that she wished, and dared not to express. The result she felt was formal and constrained—a very different letter from what she had intended. How could she write naturally to him now, with the simple cordiality of a

friend? It was quite impossible with that yearning feeling to say so much more. And yet that could not be expressed, however much she wished it. No one could have been more dissatisfied with the somewhat forced and uninteresting composition produced by this conflicting state of mind, or more mournfully conscious of its shortcomings both in a literary and a personal point of view than was Detta herself, as she made her way one evening, with the closed and directed letter in her hand, down the Palazzo stairs. A feeling of not unnatural shyness had prevented her from trusting the epistle to Bettina's care, having had experience of the sharp observation and unsparing comments of that young person upon any subject which roused her interest or excited her curiosity. She walked slowly towards the post, for even at this last moment she was debating within herself as to whether she would not destroy the letter and make a fresh attempt. She even paused a moment beside the letter-box, before at length, with a sudden movement approaching self-contempt, she dropped it in, and then

turned to retrace her steps equally slowly, her mind many thousand miles away from the streets whose pavements she trod.

It was quite dusk as she re-entered the gateway of the Palazzo, and the courtyard was wrapt in deepest gloom as she felt her way up the spiral staircase. She had reached the first landing, when a man's voice proceeding from the corner almost beside her, caused her to start violently.

"Good evening, signorina," it said in a mocking tone, but half-disguised by a thin veil of politeness. "You are late out to-night, and I—faithful still to your charms—I have awaited your return this long time. Ah! beautiful one, you cannot pass me by surely without a word this time?"

It was the voice of the Conte della Coschia, and, as he spoke, he approached, barring the way. Benedetta was no coward, and, at the moment, indignation triumphing over fear, she scorned to cry for assistance, trusting to her own powers to free herself from her companion.

"Remove yourself from out of my way,"

she said in a tone trembling rather with anger than timidity, "unless you are a coward, Signor Conte!"

But to be called a coward by pretty lips mattered little to Paolo della Coschia. He laughed lightly

"No, no, mia bella, I cannot let you go so easily. How about that bouquet which you so scornfully flung into the street? Think you a man has no feelings? Ah! signorina, how I love you! But you are wise, my pretty one, inasmuch as, though you threw away the flowers, you did not scorn to keep the diamond brooch."

"You lie, signor," said Detta; "if you have not the brooch, it is in your servant's hands; I returned it to you. But I wish now that I had flung it into the street in company with the bouquet!"

"Cospetto, carina! but you are a little tiger! I love you all the more. But you shall pay for your scorn of me, mia bella."

And as she strove to pass, and to escape from him, he suddenly flung his arm around her.

Then at length a terrified scream burst from the girl's lips, as, with sudden blind terror, she recognised how powerless was her feeble strength in the grasp of a full-grown man, and how vain the weapons of scorn or self-possession brought to bear upon one so unscrupulous as her present persecutor.

The stone staircase was of great height; a considerable distance separated each flat, and the inner doors shutting them off were thick and heavy. Had no one been upon the stairs it would have been quite possible that Detta's screams might not have penetrated beyond the staircase, or brought to her the assistance she desired.

Fortunately for her, however, some one was already upon the upper landing—some one who, upon the sound of her cry, sprang with breathless rapidity down the steps and was upon them ere either of the pair had heard his approach.

There was a momentary pause; and then a tall slight figure sprang upon Della Coschia, seizing him by the neck and shaking him much in the way a terrier shakes a rat. The

new assailant was certainly not an Englishman; for he was evidently ignorant of the science of boxing; but he had sufficient of muscular force joined to the energy of youthful passion, to make him at this moment more than a match for the Conte's broader shoulders and greater height. In the space of two seconds he had completely worsted that nobleman and sent him—a curse upon his lips—down the stairs with a celerity more conducive to the satisfaction of his aggressor than to that of his own dignity. Then the young man turned towards Benedetta; and, with a cry of relief, she hung upon his arm.

“Ino!” she exclaimed, “O, Ino! what should I have done without you?”

She was half-laughing, half-crying with the effect of her past terror and her present relief and astonishment; and Ino put his arm round her tenderly to support her.

“You are upset, my signorina,” said he, “and no wonder. Ah!” and he pressed his lips together, the darkness concealing from her the dangerous light which gleamed in

his eyes, "let me but meet that ruffian again! But you shall not speak of it as yet, Piccola."

"He did not harm me," said Detta, beginning to recover herself. "He only put his arm round my shoulders. But O," and she shuddered, "he terrified me—he is a bad man. But I shall fear him no longer now that you are here, dear Ino."

There was no reply, unless an added tenderness in the care with which he led her on, could be taken as response.

Nature had bestowed upon the young sculptor the spontaneous eloquence of his race; but had also bestowed upon him feelings sometimes too deep for words, and emotions apt, like the river—whose very impetuosity checks its own course and dams its twisting bed—to choke up the relieving outlets of demonstration.

Ino had not heard of Cortauld's second stroke; Detta's letter, written to inform him, having gone astray owing to a few days' visit on the demands of business to the neighbourhood of Ferrara; consequently

great had been the shock he experienced on his return on being made acquainted with the forlorn condition of his old friend. He had already engaged a studio not far from the Palazzo, and it had been his intention, upon returning, to invite the Maestro to share his home; with characteristic generosity taking upon himself for the future the filial charge of the old musician.

It was only the thought of Detta, and the reflection that possibly this course might have the result of deciding her to rejoin her English friends, that had made him instinctively postpone a mention of the plan. Unselfish as he was, he felt that were Benedetta to take flight from Rome, the blow would be a very bitter one. He could not by his own act destroy the chance once more of meeting her and pleading his cause. Her heart still seemed untouched, so far as he knew, by any other; and surely devotion such as his could not fail in time to win some response from one who already regarded him as her dearest friend. So he had decided to let the matter alone until he had seen and conversed with both.

And now he saw that it would be vain to broach any such idea. The old man was hopelessly bed-ridden for the rest of his short life; a stricken cripple, who must be left to linger out his remaining days in the room where he now lay. Meanwhile he could come in daily, and visit his two friends and by many little unobtrusive attentions could provide luxuries for the infirm old man, and smooth the path of the girl he loved. And after a time he felt little discontent with the state of affairs. Benedetta would, no doubt, have refused to shelter herself beneath his roof, and it was, perhaps, better that she and the Maestro should continue together their quiet ménage—a ménage in which he was always a welcome guest.

To Benedetta's dull and solitary life the return of Ino brought many welcome changes. It was but natural that she should rejoice greatly in the congenial companionship of one of her own age; and once again now her merry laugh might be heard ringing through the long lofty room as they sat together over their evening meal, or chatted beside the Maestro's

bed, bringing a tender smile of sympathy to the features of the blind man. Now, too, she was no longer a prisoner, as she had for the last few weeks more or less felt herself to be, for Ino needed little persuasion to be her escort on various occasions to picture galleries, to museums, and to public gardens. It had been terribly against the young man's prejudices at first to give way on this point. The greater the honour he felt it to be to accompany the signorina, the more had his gentlemanly instincts recoiled from the notion of placing her in a position which he considered equivocal. If Benedetta had had the appearance of an English Mees, it would have mattered little, for English Meeses were known by everybody to have extraordinary customs, and to be in the habit of permitting a strange intimacy to the opposite sex. But no one would have given her credit for her English extraction; and Ino could not bear to think that anyone, attracted by her grace and beauty, should cast a glance other than respectful towards the idol of his veneration.

This feeling was not mitigated when, one

morning on leaving the Palazzo doorway arm-in-arm, the girl's face being raised to his in animated discussion, the young sculptor was suddenly accosted by an acquaintance.

"Hullo, Bartolucci!" cried a cheery English voice, proceeding from an unmistakeably English youth of a good-humoured exterior, "why, I had quite forgotten that you hung out in Rome. I'm glad to see you again. You remember me—Richardson?"

"Yes," replied Raffaelino courteously, but with a sudden crimson flush on his dark face, "I remember you of course." And they shook hands.

"And I am sure," continued the young Englishman, raising his hat and speaking to Benedetta, "that I have had the pleasure of meeting you, too, once before—at a garden-party at Mrs. Wilding's it was. I was stopping with some friends in the neighbourhood—Miss Campbell, is it not?"

Detta had not the smallest recollection of Mr. Richardson; but she did not doubt his word, and chatted with him in a friendly manner, telling him whither they were bound,

exchanging news on the subject of Mrs. Wilding and her cousin, and not observing Ino's silence, or if she did so, putting it down to the score of his imperfect knowledge of the language in which they were conversing.

When, however, after a few minutes' talk, during which Mr. Richardson had explained that he was on but a hasty visit to Rome, and must be returning in a day or two to town, they separated with a cordial handshake, she was surprised to find the silence continue, and on glancing up to see a slight cloud upon her companion's brow.

"I knew it would be so," he said at length, in answer to her questionings. "That young man will go back to England and spread a gossip among your grand relations; and they will be angry with me, and you will blame me. And it will be worse with any acquaintances of my own country. They will say I am wanting in respect to you, and have persuaded you to do that which no other signorina is permitted to do."

"I have no acquaintances here, Ino."

“But I have, signorina, and they know who you are.”

“Oh, then, it is for your own sake that you dread their comments?”

“You know—you know it is for you. You are cruel, Detta.”

“I wish you would care less about gossip and more about my happiness!” she exclaimed petulantly.

“Your happiness—ah, Dio!” he whispered in a voice so full of pain and mortification that she began to repent her of the stab she had inflicted. His face was crimson, and he vainly sought words by which to exculpate and explain himself.

“Forgive me, amico mio,” she said. “I didn’t mean to be cross. I know you never think about yourself, and that you care a great deal too much about my happiness. You are only a dear old prim Ino, who wants to do his duty by a mad young Englishwoman. I was a prisoner in the Palazzo before you came. It was hard to be pent up like that. I have been a free bird all my life; and, whatever the cost, I will not be im-

prisoned again. But," she added, with a smile, half-proud half-caressing, "you shall not come with me if you think it best not. I will go alone."

And so her wilful determination gained the day; and Ino, only too ready to be her slave, consoled himself with a thrill of joy by the thought that if indeed heaven brought to pass his dearest wish, and gave this girl to him to be his wife, it mattered little that the gossips of Rome should accuse her of strange insular ways, little according with their notions of the *comme il faut*. And day by day his passion burnt the more brightly, fed by the flame of a growing hope.

How could he but hope, with no rival by, with Detta always ready to welcome his presence, to accept his escort, and treating him daily more and more in the light of a dear and intimate friend? These days of a deceitful hope, were perhaps the happiest the young sculptor had ever known.

His secret joy betrayed itself in his voice

and countenance; while—so blind are those nearest and dearest to us when absorbed by dreams of their own—Detta, who loved him with all a sister's genuine affection, and would have done much to ward off pain from the heart she knew to be so faithful—Detta, hearing his bright tone and seeing his unclouded face, little suspected the true reason of his light-heartedness, but congratulated herself that at last Ino had shaken off the temporary fancy he had entertained of being her lover, and was settling down with her own contented enjoyment with the happier relations of brother and sister.

Benedetta was but nineteen. She was too young to realise the fact that a platonic intimacy of brother and sister between two persons both young, beautiful and loveable, is (unless the affections of one or both be pre engaged) a thing so rare as to be almost unknown in this world of ours. With her mind full of another man, and so capable herself of the platonic sentiment, she, however, like many in a like

position, was inclined to be wanting in discrimination.

What she could not see had been already perceived by the blind and crippled musician.

“God bless you, my boy,” he said one night as he held Ino’s hand in his; “she is a sweet woman and a true one, and you are worthy of her ”

“Is there hope for me?” asked the young man eagerly. “Do you think there is any hope? You know her, Maestro.”

“Why should there not be hope?” said Cortauld in his broken tones; “what is there against you? There is no one else; and you, Ino mio—can she look for a better husband than you will make her? Ah,” he muttered to himself more softly, “I should like to see my two children united before I die.”

Meanwhile alas! the “someone else” it was thoughts of whom filled Benedetta’s heart each night as she lay down to sleep in her little three-cornered room at the top of the old Palazzo. She calculated, as the days went by, when he would receive her

letter ; and that time passed, began, half-unconsciously, to calculate how soon she might look for a reply.

Hers had been but a poor and worthless effusion ; yet the mere fact of her writing would show him that she thought of him, that she was interested in his welfare, and in some measure cared for him.

Would he reply at once ; and if so, after what fashion ? This was the question which now filled the girl's mind and occupied all her spare moments.

It was text sufficient for meditation night and day ; whilst the very delay necessarily ensuing between her letter and his answer, was but a period of happy waiting, in which hope deferred was a prolonged anticipation of coming pleasure.

During these weeks of blissful anticipation, Benedetta grew more beautiful than she had ever been before ; a secret glow shone in her dark eyes and an added tenderness spoke from her lips when at rest ; and perhaps it was not to be wondered at that Ino day by day looked upon her with an admiration more approach-

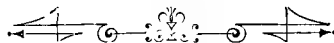
ing reverential awe than is often offered upon a woman's shrine, in this our practical and prosaic world. Never a work left his studio now, whether of ancient goddess or of modern maid, but bore some faint resemblance to the girl he loved; though he was himself, perhaps, unaware of the fact. It had become impossible for him to conceive of beauty other than built upon the lines of his ideal. And yet, so far from this giving a sameness a monotony to his compositions, his touch had become more tender, his eye more true; and his fame, alike with his skill, increased daily as it had never done before.

But the very intensity of the young sculptor's desires increased his caution. He would not startle her again, as he had done that first time in London; he would wait until he was sure, quite sure, that his words would bring no flush save that of joy upon the soft cheek, and that her hand would be willing to meet his stretched towards her with so great a yearning.

And, all unwitting of the feelings in his breast, Benedetta went on her way, calmly,

brightly and busily. She had plenty to do now; for she often made her way to the picture galleries, and, with Ino's help, had commenced making copies of some of the less severe works of the great masters. Partly through his assistance, too, she had heard of one or two more pupils, whom she instructed in singing. It was a great satisfaction to Detta to feel herself once more in the way of earning something. She had no pride at all about the matter, and unaffectedly enjoyed both the acquaintance and tuition of her new pupils. She laughed merrily when Ino at first combated the idea of her seeking employment; declining to listen for an instant to his dissuasions on the subject, and forcing him at last, as she always did, not only to cease opposing her, but even to assist her. And so the days, full of healthy occupation and a happy looking forward, passed by rapidly, and closed invariably in the same manner. However busy, however exciting had been the morning, the evening was always the same; and nothing would have tempted Detta to relinquish for any other pursuits the last

hour or two spent by the bedside of the Maestro, when, with the blind face turned towards hers, its weary sadness half dispelled, and with the withered hand lying in hers, she would tell him in her bright young voice of all that had been seen and done that day—nay, much of what she had felt and thought. To the old man, that hour or two of the twilight, breaking in upon his life's darkness with fresh ideas and with delicate fancies, were the brightest of the twenty-four; and were looked forward to with a silent expectation of enjoyment which lightened the burden of many dreary moments.



CHAPTER VI.

TWO DIAMOND-DIGGERS.

SINCE turning the last page we have traversed several thousand miles, and now find ourselves at the town of Kimberley in the province of Griqualand, South Africa. Town it was called, but the streets were then little better than half-ploughed ditches, and the shops consisted chiefly of spirit stores. There was little attempt at regularity in the arrangement of the houses, some of which were entirely of corrugated iron, others of metal roofs and canvas sides. They were scattered about hither and thither in all directions at every conceivable angle, and facing to any quarter, according to the individual taste or pleasure of each separate owner; so that the place resembled an ill-arranged camp rather than anything that

to modern ideas could be called a town. Where every dwelling-place had been flung down at random, the distinction of streets appeared a somewhat sarcastic and useless subscription to modern weakness. It was certainly difficult in Kimberley, unless long residence or a wide circle of acquaintance had proved exceptionally enlightening, to find out the abode of a friend, amidst a congregation of huts of which one differed from another merely in size ; and where too there was the added inconvenience that your friend, having grown tired of the position of his house, might have hired a score or so of blacks and had it transferred bodily to some new position ! Quite on the outskirts of the town, at a spot where the huts were but thinly sprinkled over the brown monotonous, far-reaching veldt, stood one before which were seated the figures of two young men. One at least was seated on a barrel beside the open door, his legs dangling and a short pipe between his lips ; the other, also smoking, lay face downwards, heels in the air and his face resting on his hands, upon

a mattress which he had dragged to the entrance, so that his head was outside and his feet inside the narrow domicile. Both were in their shirt-sleeves, and both were tanned brown as mahogany; yet an intelligent stranger would probably have guessed, from a nameless something about their appearance, that both were gentlemen. Presently the younger of the two—the man lounging with so much comfort upon the mattress—broke the silence. “I think,” he said, lifting himself up slowly and beginning to shake out the ashes of his pipe, “I shall clean myself up and take a turn round to see Mrs. Bayley ”

Mrs. Bayley was the wife of a government official receiving six hundred a year pay, and who on this liberal income, was enabled in this part of the world (by dint of good management and careful economy) to keep one servant, and to possess a little three-roomed house—of corrugated iron like all the rest—with a square garden the size of a pocket-handkerchief in front. She, was however, a lady; perhaps the only English lady in this

new out-of-the way colony of rough spirits and adventurers.

She had two pretty children, and was herself a gentle, sweet-faced woman, sorely tried by the roughness and discomforts of her position ; but, with the spirit of a true wife and patient Englishwoman, uttering no complaint and making the best of a hard necessity. Even in a place like Kimberley there were a certain per-centage of men with sufficient of the instincts of youth, of natural tenderness or of gentlemanliness, to take pleasure in the unusual sight of a refined woman, and of a room which, though tiny, was tastefully arranged ; and to feel their hearts grow soft at the sight of little children, reminding them perhaps of home and the old half-forgotten family life. Hence it was rather the fashion amongst the better sort to go round of an evening now and then and look up Mrs. Bayley and her husband.

“Are you coming ?” asked the young man on the mattress, turning to his companion.

“Not to-night, thanks, Nisbet.”

“Fagged ? ”

“No, not particularly, I don’t feel inclined for society, that’s all.”

“Going to moon, I suppose? Tell you what it is, old fellow, you look seedy the last day or two. That infernal book work does not suit you.”

“Oh, it suits me well enough,” returned the other between the puffs of his pipe.

“You are too old, you know, Conway. A man requires elasticity for this kind of life. What’s your age?”

“Thirty-one,” said Beresford, with a quiet smile at his companion’s bluntness. “Quite a Methusaleh, ain’t I?”

“Well, you see it’s late to throw off former habits, and begin roughing it for the first time. It wears a man out to try it on. Now I,” and he shook his tall slight figure with a boyish self-assurance, “enjoy the thing thoroughly.”

Beresford smiled again.

“I don’t think I am wearing out,” he remarked, “as yet.” And in truth his well-knit, athletic form bore no unfavourable comparison to the slimmer proportions of

the youth beside him. "And as for enjoyment, I never enjoyed any six months so much in my life; 'till the last month at least, since we came up to this place."

"It is rather a beastly hole, I must admit," said young Nisbet.

"A furnace of fleas," remarked Conway; "and not a square inch of shade."

"Nor society," added his companion.

"Oh, well, as to society, I'm sick of that," said the ex-man of fashion with sincerity; "shirt sleeves and a short pipe are far preferable to any society in my opinion."

"That's an odd thing for you to say," observed Nisbet, "for I suppose you have gone in for it pretty freely. There was nothing, I presume, to prevent your taking up shirt sleeves and a short pipe at any time, if you had liked?"

"No," said his friend, leaning back against the iron wall and closing his eyes dreamily; "nothing, except the slavery of custom and social etiquette—the ignorance of the upper classes. What an age ago it seems!"

"By Jove, doesn't it," said young Nisbet.

And then they both relapsed into silence, broken presently by the whistling of the younger man as he disappeared within the house to go through the process of "cleaning up."

In a few minutes he re-appeared with his hair well brushed, and a coat on his back, looking a fair sample of a straightforward, flat-shouldered young Englishman.

Beresford was still leaning back against the house-wall, slowly swinging his feet, his face surrounded by the little eddying circles of smoke.

"I say," said Nisbet, pausing as he passed, "what a lazy fellow you are! I wonder how many hours you spend every evening mooning on that barrel half-asleep? You ought to have been a poet, Conway."

"A poet in a soda-water manufactory sounds incongruous, don't it, Jim? But I'm thinking of something."

"You?" asked his companion incredulously, "you haven't enough energy to think of anything."

Quick as lightning Conway was off his

barrel, and with the aid of one foot and one hand had laid Jim Nisbet neatly on the ground.

“Hullo! What’s that for?” inquired the prostrated youth, leaping up. “That’s mean, Conway, confoundedly mean, when you know I’ve got my best togs on and can’t close with you!”

“Don’t, pray don’t,” said Beresford, who had resumed his favourite seat; “it’s far too hot for any such thing; it was only my superfluous energy.”

“And the thought?”

“The thought is—that you mustn’t be astonished some day when you come home to find the house gone. They are settling all round us now, and shutting us in. I think we must remove further out into the veldt again. I want breathing space. Or perhaps——” And he paused a moment, speaking more lazily and deliberately than before, “you may find *me* gone.”

“You don’t mean that?” asked his friend with a change of manner.

“There’s no knowing. I’m an erratic

chap. I sometimes think of trying my luck elsewhere ; or possibly returning to Europe."

Young Nisbet's face grew serious.

"Don't do that, Conway," he said ; "surely you won't? Just when we are getting on so well, too, and I have had so much luck. A few months more will make our fortunes ; and then we can do as we like, and leave this filthy hole together."

"Don't distress yourself. I daresay I shan't go," returned Conway. Then glancing up and seeing a certain change on his companion's face, due probably to some softer and more genial feeling, he added : "Of course I shouldn't go without letting you know, old fellow. But sometimes one feels as if the Kimberley society palled upon one a little."

"Though," said his companion a little scornfully, "you enjoy roughing it so much! You are not made of settler's stuff!" And with that he disappeared round the corner of the hut on his way to the Bayleys' house, not many hundred yards distant.

Conway finished his pipe with deliberation,

and then rose slowly and entered the hut. Within were the two beds, a table, a seat or two, and several boxes, upon which were massed a heterogeneous company of cooking utensils, washing utensils, and various other household gods. A little mirror, barely a foot square, and hung against one of the walls, was all the looking-glass provided to minister to the vanity of the two Englishmen, or to assist them in their shaving operations; but, on the other hand, a large bath, an exceedingly expensive luxury in this part of the world, where every pint of water had its stated value, was propped up against one corner of the small apartment.

Flinging open one of the boxes, and thereby scattering to the ground an endless assortment of goods belonging to himself and his companion, Conway drew from it ink and writing materials. Then dragging the box after him into the open, he placed the paper upon it, and throwing himself upon the ground, prepared to write his letter.

He and James Nisbet had now spent several weeks together in this limited and stifling

den, which little deserved the dignified name of house. The acquaintance had been made under somewhat peculiar circumstances, and had quickly ripened into friendship between the two. Beresford had been making his way northwards when he first encountered his companion. He had grown tired of the Boer family and his tutorial duties, and had determined to push on towards Kimberley to see what diamond mining was like. He had a small capital with him, and intended to try his own hand at the uncertain pastime. It seemed to him that it would interest him to see for himself something of this rough, wild mining population, of whom every Englishman has heard and read so much—to join in their pursuits—and to study the strong lawless characters which there would be sure to abound ; while, on the other hand, he was as likely as most men—probably more likely than a drunkard or a gambler—to come in for a stroke of luck which, when gained, he was far less likely to lose.

So he had started up country, doing part of

the distance in a mail cart, which, among two or three other passengers, was likewise conveying young Nisbet, then a stranger to him. On the second day of their journey an accident had happened. Dusk was coming on, and a river having to be forded, the driver, either from negligence or ignorance failing to choose the best spot for the crossing, dashed in where the torrent was sufficiently high and the opposite bank sufficiently steep to all but upset the cart, and to place the whole party in danger of their lives. As it was, with a determined effort and a terrific jerk, the horses, fortunately fairly fresh, gained the opposite bank in safety; but the jolt had unseated everyone in the conveyance, and one—young Nisbet—had failed to retain his hold, and, falling into the black, eddying stream, had been swept off his feet by the raging torrent.

For a moment nothing was seen of him—then there was a gleam of something white, and Conway jumped quickly off the bank into the river. The young man was evidently being swept away, and without assistance

would be drowned. Conway was a powerful man and a good swimmer, and, as he dropped into the stream and felt himself unable to resist its course, he struck out boldly towards a slight bend lower down, from whence he was able to rescue Nisbet's body as it floated by, and then to hold on until both could be drawn up the steep acivity. But, this having been done, it was found that the younger man was quite insensible, and in no condition to proceed on his journey. He was conveyed to the nearest house, which happened to be that of a Boer farmer; where, after hurried reflection, Conway decided to remain also, leaving the mail cart to go on its way without him. The other three passengers were storekeepers—Africanders—rough men hardened to accident and suffering, either to themselves or others—men who would have felt but little compunction in leaving the half-drowned youth to the tender mercies of unfriendly Boers.

These latter would certainly not have troubled themselves to make any particular efforts for his restoration; and it seemed to

Conway little less than murder to leave the youth in his present condition in their hands. So he remained behind deploring his ill luck, only by means of mingled threats and bribery inducing his hosts to continue the necessary active measures. But when at length the suspended animation returned, three days of fever supervened, and after that two or three more of prostration, so that it was fully a week later before the two started afresh on their road to the diamond fields.

By that time Beresford knew everything about his companion that was to be known. James Nisbet was twenty-two years of age, the son of a clergyman in the south of England. He had run away from home, and made his way out to the Cape without informing his parents, simply from a love of adventure, a hatred of the office life to which he had been condemned, and a wish to escape from the strict supervision and apparently somewhat harsh treatment of his father. He was a wild young fellow, not without his failings, but withal straightforward and warm-hearted, nor by any means wanting in mother-wit.

He was a pleasant companion, and the grateful affection with which he repaid the kindness Conway had shown to him was not unpleasant to the other.

He confessed to his new friend that, since coming to Africa, he had often been led into an over-indulgence in strong drinks; and, indeed, that the cause of his falling off the cart the evening when Conway had saved his life, was owing to a drowsiness induced by his incessant potations that day. He had demurred a good deal, but finally given in, when his companion had insisted upon his becoming a total abstainer; but already was willing to acknowledge that he had never taken a wiser step in his life. Under Conway's influence, too, he had written to inform his parents of his whereabouts and his plans; and, having fully recovered his strength, and got rid of every weight upon his conscience, was now about as light-hearted a young fellow as could be found within the length and breadth of Kimberley. On first arriving at the fields, Conway had invested the small capital he had with him in the

purchase of a claim, worked together by himself and his comrade. But the labour soon palled upon Beresford. He had little of the gambling spirit which rendered it so exciting to most of his neighbours; and, although of a strong and active frame, had in truth, as Nisbet said, passed the age when a man, brought up to the life of an English gentleman, can turn with any satisfaction to mere manual labour. He, therefore, relinquished the work after a week or two; placing, with characteristic generosity, the claim bought by his capital, unreservedly in his companion's hands, to be carried on by him on the basis of shared profits. He had then accepted the post which he now held—that of accountant and overseer at a soda-water manufactory—a dull position, which he was already beginning to think might be changed for the better. He had almost got over the relish with which his plebeian occupations had at first inspired him, and the humorous enjoyment of sitting on a bank of earth in miner's clothes, his well-kept hands soiled with mud, and a short clay

pipe between his lips; or standing in his linen suit contemplating rows of soda-water bottles, and adding up in a big ledger the weekly returns of the firm whose servant he was. Since coming to Kimberley, he had begun to experience at times a great disgust of his coarse surroundings, and a corresponding longing for the refinements of home. Certainly, if a man, once accustomed to civilisation, would be likely anywhere to realise its vanished charms, it would be in a colony of this sort, where three-fourths of his fellow-men are drunkards, roués, or gamblers, and where the remaining fourth can neither read nor write. An educated man coming into such a region, is apt (when the first novelty of the life has worn off, and if neither besotted by drink, nor maddened by the love of speculation) to be seized at times with unexpected and passionate spasms of home-sickness—of yearnings after some place where his neighbours could open their lips without an oath, where a meal was sometimes eaten off a table-cloth with the assistance of other than not an over-clean

clasp-knife, and where one per cent. of the community possessed a book, or could quote a line of Shakespeare. Had it not been for young Nisbet, I think ere this Mr. Conway would have made good his escape from the region of pickaxe and basket, and returned to the more congenial occupations to be found in agricultural districts. He often thought now what a fool he had been to throw up that business, one of the first he had engaged in, of overlooking the line of railway workers, all in the open air and on horseback as it had been ; and thought to himself that if he remained in Africa, he must try to get another such post, or better still, perhaps, endeavour to join the Cape Mounted Police. But these ideas were sorely against James Nisbet's wishes ; and for his sake, Conway delayed putting them into execution. The young man, notwithstanding his late misadventure, was one whose steps seemed always attended by good luck. During the short time that he had worked the claim, he had already had several finds of no inconsiderable value, and looked

forward, not, perhaps, unreasonably, to making a rapid fortune both for himself and his partner.

“I have already doubled the capital you invested,” he had said a day or two before this; “is not that enough?” Conway was bound to confess that it was enough—perhaps more than any man had a right to expect in the short space of four or five weeks. “And,” continued his companion with the hopefulness begotten of previous luck, “give me six months, and you shall have a thousand pounds for every hundred you laid out.”

And Conway, moved by the lad’s entreaties, had more than half promised to give him the six months.

“If I don’t, Jim,” he had said, “you will be no loser, but the contrary; for I will only take the original sum invested with me, and will leave you the undivided benefit of the claim.”

But the last few days the home-sickness had grown stronger within him; and something had occurred which made him feel it

just possible that he might quit Kimberley or even the continent of Africa at shorter notice.

This something was a letter which he now took from his pocket and spread out on the box before him.

It was a long chatty letter from cousin Fanny, as he called her, received and read some days before, but which he now turned over to find a particular passage. The passage which he studied carefully was this:

“Now I must tell you some news about your friend Detta. She is, as perhaps you know, still in Rome, and is going to marry that handsome young sculptor, her old playmate, whom, of course, you remember meeting at our house that last happy year when we were in London, before this horrible trouble and loss came upon us all. Young Charles Richardson has just come from Rome, where he met them together, and he says there is no doubt at all about it. Of course one always knew it must end that way, thrown together as they have been. I fancy they

have been in love with each other ever since they were children ; and although at first it sounds like a *mésalliance*, yet, when one comes to think of it, it is not such a bad thing. He is, I believe, a respectable young fellow, fairly refined for his class, and will, I daresay, make her a good husband ; and, young Richardson tells me, is considered a very rising man in Rome. And Detta, after all, is half an Italian herself, with no family to boast of on her mother's side. And I really don't see what home she could have found in England ; for she has, I hear, quarrelled with her Aunt Dumbarton ; and I am far too poor now to keep anybody but myself ; and it is Quixotic nonsense on the part of Arthur and Eva to say *they* can. I wish you could see Eveleen in her new capacity as mistress of her small household," etc., etc., etc.

Conway folded up the letter and returned it to his pocket ; then took up his pen, and with a firm hand, wrote a few lines on the sheet before him.

Whilst doing so, a shadow fell before him, and he glanced up.

“Oh, it's you, Spider, is it?” he remarked.

“Do anything for you to-night, Boss?” enquired the tall Zulu who stood leaning against the entrance of the house beside him.

“Well, let me see, Charlie. Yes, there are two or three things on the floor inside. Bring them out and wash them. And be careful you don't take too much of our precious water.”

The Zulu grinned and chuckled as he obeyed, first, however, glancing towards his employer with an ingratiating air, well understood by the latter.

“Where's your pipe?” he demanded.

And forthwith an old brown pipe was pulled out of the man's waistband, and presented to Conway, who stuffed it full of tobacco.

Then Charlie entered to do his work, and the Englishman continued his letter.

“Spider Charlie,” so called from the length of his lanky limbs and his somewhat ungainly movements, was a well-

known personage to many of the inhabitants of Kimberley, and a special favourite with Conway and his companion. He was a finely-built native of intelligent expression and good character ; and was often employed on odd jobs of one sort and another by them—jobs for which he was amply rewarded by a liberal allowance of tobacco and an occasional insignificant present in the way of cash.

Either he was prompt over his work, or Conway was slow, for the one had finished what he had been set to do before the other had concluded his letter ; and finding the Englishman disinclined for conversation, had sloped off and vanished into the distance.

It was now quite dusk, and Conway could barely see to write his concluding words ; and without reading over what he had written, he folded up the sheet and closed and addressed the envelope.

Then he pushed the box from him, and rising, began slowly to pace to and fro upon the withered grass.

"I may as well know the truth," he was saying to himself; "and I think she will tell me as soon as anyone. If it be so, then there is an end of everything. If it be not true—she has no home in England—she shall hear once more that what little I have now to offer her is at her disposal. She may prefer me to homelessness, if she do not care for her sculptor. But she does care."

The heavy dew was falling, penetrating through his shirt and wetting him to the very skin; and the brilliant stars of a tropical night began to flame out overhead. But Beresford Conway heeded neither the discomforts of the one nor the glories of the other. He was full of a new bitterness. It was late in life to realise, for the first time, that his vaunted callousness was a delusion, and that he was not to be exempted from that boyish ardour of emotion, which, in other men had so constantly evoked his smile of calm amusement; nor from the mortification which he had been wont to say no woman's caprices should have the power to rouse in men of sensible and well-regulated minds.

CHAPTER VII.

REVENGE DELAYED.

SPRING was merging into summer in the Eternal City. Easter with its illuminations, its processions, its gorgeous services and shows, had long since passed ; the Campagna, still untouched by the coming drought, lay waving in the sunshine its vast expanse of virgin green ; and the little flowers and ferns that burst from every stone of the Coliseum and smiled upon the ground once watered by the blood of martyrs or trodden by the feet of emperors, had scarcely as yet withered away under the glaring rays of the summer sun. The month of May, so beautiful a month in Rome, was in fact still in its youth ; and Benedetta had but just begun to tell herself that she might any day now look forward to the arrival of that letter from Africa which

hope told her would surely not be delayed. Pleasant weeks they had been to Detta, full of interest and occupation; whilst to Raffaelino Bartolucci—seeing her each day, devoting leisure moments to the congenial task of educating her artistic eye and facile pencil, pacing with her through picture galleries, over the soft turf of palace gardens embroidered by the dancing shadows of the trees, or seated beside her in the dim soothing quiet of Cortauld's room—they represented a short dream of perfect happiness. Since his arrival and the day when he had so speedily put to flight her tormentor down the stairs of the Palazzo, Benedetta had been troubled no further with the insulting attentions of the Conte della Coschia. Twice since that occasion she had seen him; once at San Pietro during the Easter-day services, and once again in the gallery of the Vatican; but on each occasion Ino had been beside her and the Conte at some little distance; and although she felt conscious that the unpleasant eyes were fixed upon herself, he had made no effort to approach or in any

way molest her. The only event of any particular interest which occurred about this time was the arrival of an interesting communication from her cousin, or rather from Major Drew. In it he informed her, half-humourously, half in sober congratulation, that he was now a father; and that not of one child only, but of a pair of great fat babies! Major Drew did not appear at all discomfited by this sudden addition to his household; but seemed, on the contrary, in the best of spirits, and quite of the opinion that two babies were better than one.

It was nearly a week since their advent, and Eva was going on splendidly; while as for the "two little beggars," they were as lively as rabbits, the colour of boiled lobsters, and in every way declared to be most satisfactory both by the nurse and Mrs. Wilding. By the bye, did Detta know that Mrs. Wilding had been persuaded to come and live with them for good and all? That house of the Carletons' in the north was so big and gloomy, it was dreariness itself, with

only two servants ; and expensive besides in many ways ; far from the town also and short of decent society So she was going to put up her horses—(figuratively speaking now, alas ! poor Mrs. Wilding)—at any-rate for a time, with Eveleen and himself. Then followed kindly inquiries after her welfare, and a notice to the effect that he had been commissioned by his wife to write this letter ; and Major Drew remained her affectionate cousin Arthur. A few pencilled words written by Eva were however enclosed.

“I am horribly ashamed of myself,” she wrote, “Arthur seems to think I have done rather a clever thing, but I feel (and I know mamma thinks, though she won’t say it), that twins are dreadfully vulgar. I suppose I must go in for two nurses, unless I can find one strong enough to carry a baby on each arm, and to attend to both at the same time when they squall, which—dear little healthy things ! —they are always doing more or less. And about yourself, Detta ? Are you ever coming back to England ? Ah ! I fear you are a sly girl and are treating us badly A

little bird has told me something which I think you might have confided to *me* at all events. Haven't *I* been in love too, carina, with my blessed old Arthur, and for that matter am still? So be quick and tell everything, like a good girl, to your loving Eva."

Benedetta's cheeks had flushed hotly on reading this little enclosure. How was it that Eva knew her secret? What little bird could have flown from Rome to lay bare to her cousin thoughts and feelings which she had believed hidden, unperceived by anyone, in the innermost recesses of her heart?

The thought of Eva, little fair Eva, with her two fat babies, brought an involuntary smile to her face. She must write at once and congratulate her cousin. But, however unkind Eveleen might pretend to think it, she could not answer that little personal inquiry; nor would she admit that she had any confidences to bestow. Perhaps, some day, there might be something to tell; but not now, not yet.

So the reply, a long and loving one, was

sent without delay ; but in it no mention was made of the subject upon which Eva had expressed her curiosity. And her cousin receiving the letter, nodded her head sagely, remarking to her husband : “ Ah, you see it is quite true, Arthur. She says nothing about it, and that’s a sure sign it’s on, though not perhaps quite settled. They will be a handsome couple. Poor Beresford ! I don’t know why, but I always fancied he had more than half a *tendresse* in that direction. And he was always so difficult to please ; I never knew him take a fancy to any other girl.”

“ Except you, my darling.”

“ Rubbish ! He never cared a straw for me in that way. Well, I am sorry ; it would have been jolly if those two had made it up together. Now I suppose I shall never see her again.”

The one other incident affecting Benedetta this spring was the departure of Bettina. Bettina, alas ! this time was going for good and all ; as, with a few tears and blushes and many smiles, she informed the signorina. Carlo had got a little house ready for her.

He had been very patient—he had waited for her these three years ; and she had promised to marry him ere the summer was over.

Bettina's ideas upon the subject of matrimonial bliss were not extravagant.

“We shall get on,” she said, “as well as most married folks. He is not a drunkard, and he will not beat me, for he has always been a lazy, good-natured fellow. O yes,” and she shrugged her shoulders, blushing a little, “he is not a bad sort, this Carlo, and I like him well enough. It will be better living in a little house and garden of one's own, than to listen all day long to the scolding of the Aunt Scalchi.”

Nevertheless, her bright face, and the pretty glow in her dark eyes revealed more than Bettina cared to acknowledge of her little secret of unavowed happiness.

“I hope he will be good to you,” said Benedetta. She was sorry, more than she could say, for Bettina's departure ; it was not only that she should miss the gay voice and merry talk of the Tuscan girl, but she would lose one who had a real affection for her, and

who was almost the sole companion she possessed in this great city, of her own age and sex.

“Si, si, signorina,” replied Bettina; “he will be good enough for me. Stupid of course, as men generally are—but all the less likely perhaps to ruin himself at the lottery, or make a fool of himself, like the clever ones so often do. If it were not for leaving you I should be quite content. But you will miss me. Bianca, who is coming, is cross and disagreeable—very different from me. She is also short and stout and ugly. But she will not stop here long, for she has a temper like the evil one; and when the Aunt Scalchi scolds her, she will give it her back again, word for word. It will be hammer, hammer, hammer, ‘brut-brut,’ all day long.” And she took up the signorina’s hands and kissed them affectionately. “Dear signorina, don’t forget me!” she said, the tears hanging on her long dark lashes.

So Bettina had gone, and Bianca, the new handmaiden, had taken her place. Bianca was, as the other had said, short, and stout,

and ugly Her appearance was not attractive, her expression being sulky; whilst her temper, after the first few days, appeared quite of the character described by Bettina.

July was now approaching, and Benedetta, undaunted by last year's sufferings, prepared to spend another summer in the Italian capital. As yet the weather was only brilliant, not oppressive; and both she and Ino had now too many interests in life to trouble themselves about a little heat more or less. The foreign visitors, however, were departing from the city, leaving it pretty much to the workers, and to those whose home it was.

The last few months had done much to better Ino's position, and to put his name before the world as that of a rising artist; and his growing success was a source of much exultation to his two friends in the Palazzo.

It was often a theme for congratulation on Benedetta's lips; and she was talking of it one afternoon, as together they made their way home from the picture gallery where she

had for some time been engaged in copying, and whence he had been to fetch her. The streets were crowded, for there had been some races that day in the vicinity; and many a passer-by turned to glance admiringly at the beautiful face uplifted so eagerly to his.

“Another commission, Ino?” she was saying. “Why, you will be a great man even before we thought. Nay, I begin to think you *are* a great man already.”

He was about to reply, when the sound of some words uttered behind caused him to pause.

“Ah!” said a voice, as its owner laughed sneeringly, “that’s the fellow, just in front, who put up the new statue at the entrance to the Palazzo L——. Goes in for being a genius; but has all his ideas second-hand, I hear, from Gréville, the Parisian.”

Bartolucci glanced round. Not a word had escaped him; but he could see that, absorbed as she had been by her own conversation, the speech had been inaudible to Detta. At the same moment a party of three young men

pushed by them somewhat roughly. The trio were well-dressed, and had the air of gentlemen, and the one nearest him was, he saw at a glance, the Conte della Coschia—the man who, two months ago he had precipitated down the Palazzo stairs. That the Conte fully recognised him was shown clearly enough—without taking into account the insolence of his words—by the still more insolent expression of the gaze he fixed upon Ino.

Although, as a rule, gentle to a fault, the young sculptor was not devoid of Southern warmth. He was by no means the man to pass by a malicious libel, nor yet a push given with studied rudeness and *malice prepense* in the public street. The blood rose quickly to his cheeks, and he determined that the Conte should hear again with reference to his lying taunt. But, at the moment, he controlled himself for the sake of his companion; and, with some difficulty checking the quick retort which rose to his lips, contented himself with squaring his elbow so as to force the Conte to step aside into the roadway. But

the latter was in no mood to receive a rebuff quietly, neither was he sufficient of a gentleman to refrain from open quarrelling on the score of a young girl's presence. In the company of his two friends also—men of his own stamp—he felt it necessary to uphold his dignity, and perfectly convenient to employ a bullying tone. He was not sorry, too, perhaps to include the girl who had repulsed his attentions in the insult he desired to put upon her companion.

“How now, Signor Scultore, do you require all the pathway to yourself?” he asked. “And are you in the habit of pushing gentlemen into the street?”

The reply was quiet enough.

“I shall certainly push those into the street who cannot make room for a lady.”

A loud laugh followed his words. They were now close to the angle of their own via, and Ino hurried Benedetta forward, not, however, in time to save her overhearing light words, said with the intent, as he well knew, to wound not only his own but her self-respect. They had no sooner reached the

corner than he paused a moment, speaking hurriedly :

“Go in,” he said, “do not delay. I must leave you. I have to speak to this man.”

“Do not quarrel with him, Ino,” she said, raising her eyes earnestly towards him. “He is not worth it,” she added, even while her own cheeks were flushed and her voice trembled with indignation. But he signed to her with an imperative gesture to go on, and, though he smiled, Detta noticed, as she obeyed, that his lips were white with anger. In another instant he had turned, and faced the trio as they came up the street.

“Now, Signor Conte,” he said, “I am ready for any remarks you may be pleased to make.”

“I have no remarks for you, fellow,” replied the other scornfully. “Don’t put yourself in my way next time when I am coming down the street, that’s all, or I may have to kick you out of it.”

His face was flushed. He was not a sober man ; and, although as yet barely more than

mid-day, it was patent to the young sculptor that he was already excited with wine.

“Ah!” said Ino, in the same quiet tone, “last time we met I had the pleasure of doing that office for you, if you remember”

“It is a foul lie!” exclaimed the count, with a darkened face. “Do you want me to hit you, fellow, with my stick? A gentleman can only challenge one of his own rank.”

Without taking any notice of this last taunt, Raffaelino turned towards the two friends, who stood on either side—half-amused, if not pleased, by the little incident—probably not a very uncommon one.

“You shall hear the truth, signori,” he said. “This gentleman, on the first and last occasion on which we met, was discovered by me upon a private staircase, where he had concealed himself for the purpose of terrifying a young and innocent signorina. Her screams attracted me, and I knocked him down the stairs. To-day he has made libellous assertions regarding me, and he has ventured once more to insult a lady. You may possibly agree with me that one who is not too proud

to persecute an unprotected signorina, or to make good his escape before the onslaught of one man, may also be capable of coining a malevolent lie against him who has incurred his displeasure."

The two young men laughed somewhat foolishly. They did not seem inclined to take up the defence of their friend with any particular ardour in the face of Ino's strong though repressed passion. They, however, drew the Conte back, when, with a sudden movement, he raised his stick to deal a blow at his opponent.

"Come away, come away," they said. "It is unseemly to have a row in the open street. As for this signor, you know where he lives. You can deal with him as you think fit at another time."

"Let it be so," said Ino, upon whose shoulders the stick had not descended, and who remained motionless, his scornful eyes fixed on Della Coschia's face. "My studio is, no doubt, well known to the Signor Conte, and I shall be ready to see him at any time, and to render him that account which

publicity and circumstances have to-day unfortunately frustrated. But you need not alarm yourselves, signori, he will not come ! ”

And he turned off into the side street, a witness to the smiles, not altogether flattering to their object, with which the other two dragged off their companion ; seeing also, but caring nothing to construe, a certain look of deadly hatred filling the long sinister eyes of the Conte as he moved away in silence.



CHAPTER VIII.

A RUDE AWAKENING.

IT is hard, when we fancy we hold the strings of destiny in our fingers and are guiding them as we list, to find the same strings rudely jerked out of our grasp by untoward circumstances and pointed at random in an opposite direction. Once lost, it is a hard matter sometimes to regain possession of the steering lines and to put our course straight again. Benedetta's feelings were full of a vague resentment when, some few weeks after its transmission, Conway's letter was put into her hands. She had looked forward so much to its coming, that the disappointment was correspondingly sharp. She felt sore with fate for treating her so unfairly, and with Conway for believing what he had heard.

Even Bianca, who was no particular friend of hers, nor troubled as a rule by an over-amount of sympathy, noticed as she removed the breakfast how suddenly flushed, then pale, the Signorina had become on reading her letter, and how the hands that held it trembled. Detta understood now to what her cousin Eva had referred in that congratulatory little note of hers some two months ago. It was Ino she had meant, not Mr. Conway. And she, no doubt it was, who had transmitted the gossip to the Cape. In which matter, as we know, Eveleen was wronged. She might have waited, said the girl to herself with some bitterness, for a confirmation of the report. Why need she be in such a hurry to separate herself and Conway? And he—he might have known her better than to accept such a report so readily. Might he not have seen, the last time he was with her, that it was for him she cared, not for Ino? Was it that men were blind and could not see, or was it that he had ceased to care for her, that he was indifferent to the report, and took this

opportunity of letting her know the state of his feelings in the least unpleasant manner? Yet, even while thinking these hard thoughts, Detta knew that she was treating her correspondent unfairly; for there was that about the wording of his letter—an effort, a constraint, a coldness—which might have escaped the observation of a fellow-man, but spoke plainly enough to the clearer intuition of a woman, of wounded vanity if not wounded affection. Should she answer the letter at once, telling him the truth simply and naturally, or should she leave it unanswered, at any rate for a while, allowing the belief to become certainty in his mind? Pride urged her one way, love another; and this Anglo-Italian maiden, being both very proud and very loving, the struggle was a hard one. She was strangely silent that afternoon when Ino, as was his wont, went to fetch her home on the closing of the picture gallery. Her manner towards him was even cold; for at the moment, however unjustly, her old playmate seemed to her the cause of her ill-treatment. It is needless to

say that a lover, at once so sensitive and so devoted as Bartolucci, could not fail to remark her change of manner and to suffer by it; but a great love is patient—the waves of the sea are not so easily stirred as the ripples on the mountain tarn—and he suffered in silence. “Something has grieved or wounded her,” he thought; “she is of too generous a nature to indulge, for more than a little moment, anger against one who has given her no cause of offence, and who indeed, she well knows, would do or risk much to ward off from her the slightest blow.” So he said nothing on the subject, proving only a somewhat more silent companion than usual that evening, and returning home at night to his studio, hard by, with a certain anxiety in his faithful heart and a certain pain upon his face. He was quite right in believing that Detta’s coldness would pass. It had already left her when the next day they met again; but in its place was a restlessness, a subdued uneasiness, which told him plainly of some suppressed unhappiness. Ino’s heart misgave him sorely; if she had loved him, would she

have kept from him the cause of her anxiety, unless, indeed, it were something connected with himself? But that was surely impossible. And then a thought flashed across him, after all not so very far from the truth. Might not the voice of gossip have been wagging its foolish tongue, distressing her, and offending her nice sense of refinement by the propagation of some senseless story which had come to her ears?

She who rejoiced in the innocent freedom and liberty of another Una, laid herself peculiarly open, he fancied, to the infliction of such wounds.

Meanwhile he would make no effort to force her confidence. He would wait patiently, whatever might be the cause that disturbed her, until in her own good time and of her own free will she chose to confide it to him. In this way two or three days had passed. And notwithstanding Benedetta's efforts to resume her usual tone, and regain her usual cheerfulness, she was unable to deceive her companion. And the young man's heart grew sad within him, seeing that she

suffered, and that she strove so hard though unavailingly to hide her suffering from him.

She was seated alone before one of the windows of the Maestro's room one evening. The heat of the day had been intense; and, for the first time, she had shirked her usual morning's work at the picture-gallery.

She was wearied out with the conflict going on within her, and had not had the heart to step across the blazing streets even for so short a distance as that required to gain the cooler gallery. The old man lay dozing on his bed; and she, seated there alone, had taken a letter out of her pocket and read and re-read it with a changing face. How cool and calm was its wording! Each syllable, as she perused it to herself, seemed to fall upon her heart like a drop of ice.

"It is true, is it not," the writer said, "that I have to wish you joy? I only heard a few days ago of your engagement to Bartolucci. I hoped you would have written soon

yourself to tell me; for you know I am interested in your welfare. I think you have made a wise choice in preferring him to me. He is a clever and a noble fellow, and is also, I am told, now a man of mark. I trust you have done well for yourself. If, amid your new interest, you can find a moment to remember a former friend, I shall be glad to hear of you."

This was the letter which had caused Benedetta so much pain and anger, and which even now a proud instinct urged her not to answer.

And reiterating once more to herself her arguments, and once more fighting through the battle of love and pride, without coming to any satisfactory conclusion—the hot air breathing through the open window upon her flushed face, the sound of the chiming quarters rising softly upwards through the drowsy air—by degrees the vision of things outside became dimmer, consciousness faded slowly away, and she fell asleep, the tears upon her long lashes, and the letter still clasped in her hands.

She did not wake as a light footstep came through the half-open door and paused beside her.

For a moment Ino stood gazing with bated breath, fearing to disturb her; then he crept softly to the window seat a yard off. How beautiful she looked! Could he but have transferred that drooping face to the marble, modelled by his skilful hand, what fame would have been too great, what sum too large to reward the portrayal of such loveliness! And how sad she looked with the glittering tear-drops still lying upon her lashes, and a little plaintive line about the sweet, closed mouth! Sorrow was no fitting companion for one so young, so active, so light-hearted. Ah, cruel it was to see her sorrow, and to feel he might not banish it by his love. He would have given years of toil to kiss away her tears, to hold her to his breast, and, with his arms around her, to bid the sharp arrows of fate strike her only through him—

And then his eyes rested on the letter which had fallen from her grasp and lay

loose upon her knee ; and his quick eyesight at once told him that the handwriting was that of a man. There never breathed a truer gentleman than Ino Bartolucci, son of working parents though he were ; and, after that first unconscious glance, he turned away his eyes hastily from the bold straggling writing, which at that distance he could so easily have deciphered. But a pang went through him sharper than a sword ; and, as he turned his head aside and gazed through the window, a dark mist had risen up, blurring and blotting all external things.

This then was the cause of her secret trouble—this letter from some man, some Englishman—one whom perhaps she loved with the love he felt for her—and who at any rate, on his part, had the power to wound and to grieve her.

A moment later and Benedetta opened her eyes. Her dreamy look as she caught sight of her companion changed to a startled expression, and a sudden flush rose to brow and cheek as she caught the letter once more within her grasp.

“You have read it?” she asked quickly

And Ino, too deeply hurt and mortified at the question to find a reply, looked towards her with silent reproach, the colour mantling in his cheeks.

“I beg your pardon,” she said. “Of course you haven’t. But you may as well. It is some foolish gossip which concerns you as well as me.”

And with a constrained laugh, she tossed the sheet towards him.

But he paused a moment; perhaps from a strange foreboding which assailed him—perhaps deterred by the unreality of her manner

“Do you *wish* me to read it?” he asked, not touching it, or looking at it; only trying to read the meaning in her eyes.

“O, yes;” she said, averting her face; “what does it matter? It is of no consequence; it will only make you laugh.”

Then at last he took it up; and knowing intuitively that it would be the death-warrant of his hopes, he read it slowly through.

There was little difficulty in making out the large characters, or in understanding the few simply expressed words; yet he read it through a second time, and, as he did so, Benedetta saw that his face had whitened even to the lips.

It was sudden, this downfall of every castle he had built in imagination among the fair gardens of Paradise—this crushing of every joy that had filled his heart, every thought in the present, every hope for the future, which for the last few months had been to him the very essence of life—the very essence of himself. But he spoke quiet, commonplace words to her as he gave the letter back.

“It has given you pain?” he asked, with, perhaps, a faint hope that something about her manner or her answer might possibly contradict his assurance, and acquaint him with some reason other than the one he feared as the cause of her disquiet.

She laughed again; a laugh harder and more constrained than the last.

“Oh! it does not matter,” she said; “if he likes to think it, he is welcome!”

But Ino bent towards her more earnestly.

“You care for this man?” he asked, slowly.

Then Benedetta broke down, covering her face with her hands.

“He will never know it now!” she said, almost in a whisper.

There was a pause.

“You will write to him,” said Ino, “and tell him the truth?”

“No, no!” she exclaimed, her voice full of wounded pride, “I will not write—he might have known me better.”

So now at last he knew the truth, the whole truth. All these months when he had believed her his, when he had flattered himself that the links of his own love had been forging themselves more surely about her, she had in secret belonged to this other man, her whole heart had been his; and the affection she had bestowed upon himself had been but the sisterly affection of the old days!

"He will know perhaps—soon," he said presently. "Do not fret, my Piccola," he added, softly

And Detta, ashamed of her weakness, dried her eyes, and strove to assume a careless air.

"You are not going?" she asked, as he rose from his seat.

"I am busy to-night," he said; "I will come back soon."

In the selfishness of her own emotion, she had not thought of him, nor noticed the change in his manner; but now something in the intonation of his voice, something haggard about the pale face into which she looked, revealed to her, with the rapidity of lightning, the truth to which she had been so blind these many months; and, by the same instinct revealed to her the cruel blow that had but just now been so thoughtlessly dealt towards him. Her remorse was as great as her former carelessness.

"Forgive me—I have hurt you; I have wounded you, Ino!" she exclaimed.

"There is nothing to forgive," he said,

gently; his very gentleness moving her to a more passionate compunction.

In her penitence and her humiliation, she rose and held out supplicating hands towards him.

“Forgive me, dear, dear, Ino!” she repeated. “You are too good—far too good and noble for me!”

But Ino tenderly put her back into her chair.

“Do not so,” he said; “I have nothing to complain of; you have always been kind to me, *mia sorella*.”

But she still clung to his hands, looking up into his face with tearful eyes; reading there for the first time, the great love, the greater pain that was burning in his heart, but kept with so generous an instinct from his lips.

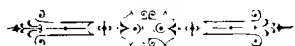
“Must you go?” she repeated. “Say you forgive me first, Ino.”

His lips quivered for a moment as he looked at her, making no response; then he bent down suddenly, and, for the second time in seven long years, kissed the smooth,

white, upturned forehead—with a kiss, reverent and tender as that a mother might lay upon the features of her dead child.

“Good-bye, my Piccola,” he said.

And then without another word he went softly from the room; and she knew that he had laid aside his love for ever.



CHAPTER IX.

THE ASSASSIN.

THERE is, perhaps, in the life of everyone some one occasion, terrible at the time, long remembered afterwards, when the human soul has to make its way through the valley of Hinnom. Some have all but perished in that valley—have escaped, at least, out of it with seared hearts, hardened and begrimed ; but others again have reached the further end and set forth anew upon the path of life, purified and chastened by the furnace heat—the gold within them tested and stamped as true. But none come forth from the struggle in all points the same as when they went in—in all there is noticeable some change ; and the world expresses its appreciation of that change by the simple observation “he or she has known trouble,” summing up in

those few words the bald statement of a sorrow which has been unto death, or a temptation whose passionate force has nearly torn the soul in two.

Such a struggle it was now Ino's part to undergo, such a trouble to face. The battle was fought in solitude, as all such battles are. The conflict was a fierce one; but he came forth from it as conqueror. And, save for a little additional pallor on the chiselled features, and a certain set look of determination about the eyes and mouth, witness there was none to the long sleepless hours of the night in which the young sculptor had waged that hand-to-hand encounter with fate and his own passions, an encounter which had brought the perspiration to his brow and madness to his heart; but from which he had risen the next morning calm as usual, stronger, nobler than before. During those long weary hours a resolution had been taken.

The sudden downfall of hope, with many results in the adoption of at any rate a temporary misanthropy. With Ino it re-

sulted in an entire self-conquest. He was not of the nature to grudge to others that happiness denied to himself. On the contrary, it seemed to him, after the first few moments of despair, the highest privilege of love to sacrifice its own interests and to toil still for the happiness of the one beloved, even by means which should in the future disconnect her life from his.

All day long as he went about his work the resolution haunted him and shaped itself more practically in his mind. Instead of faltering as the hours went on, he grew the more determined to carry out his idea ; and if, after the day's work was over, he still delayed awhile before putting it into execution, it was only that he might thereby reflect a little more upon the matter, and carry it out in the best manner possible. It was late when he seated himself before his writing-desk, and with a face a little sterner than usual, set himself to shape his clear, fine hand-writing into a few brief English words. They were written slowly and carefully, and with many pauses of thought between, and so soon as

finished, were read over with studious attention, and then at once folded up and placed in an envelope. Then he rose, and, pushing back the hair from his hot forehead, drew the curtain from before the open window and looked out

The streets were full of people—whom the heat of the day had for hours imprisoned—laughing, talking and joking, as they made their way along the narrow footpath. It was scarcely dark, although the sun had set two hours ago, and in the still blue sky a brilliant crescent moon was lighting up the housetops and sending here and there narrow streaks upon the road beneath. It was the first evening for many weeks that Ino had not visited his friends at the Palazzo Carbone.

He had not forgotten them to-night ; but with the burden of his present intention full upon him, he had felt himself unable to go. And now that the step had been taken it was too late.

Half-past ten had already chimed from the neighbouring church, and the Signora Scalchi's quiet lodgers would probably all

have retired to rest. Perhaps Detta had been wondering, as the daylight faded, why he did not come ?

Perhaps she had even — for she was an affectionate sister — missed his company, had wished for him, and in her heart blamed him as cross and unkind, as, from her lofty window, she watched the bars of gold fade away upon the western sky. Ah ! well, what mattered it even that she should blame him, think him cold or unforgiving, so long as his time had been passed in doing her a secret service ?

After a few moments he descended, and putting on his hat, went out into the street below. He walked rapidly for a few yards, for he had his errand to accomplish ; but, so soon as he had reached the post-box and dropped his letter in, he paused for a moment with a strange numbness about his heart. The night was as beautiful as his spirit was sad. Rest, or rather restless quiet, would, he felt, be intolerable to him. So, with no particular object before him, he started for one of those long nocturnal strolls in which

he had sometimes before found the relief which a sensitive mind often vainly asks of the fickle benefactress sleep. He wandered about until he was tired; then, returning homewards, sat for long on the steps of the Trinità dei Monti, gazing alternately at the wonderful blue of the midsummer sky and at the silver tracery that fell below upon hushed fountain, on sleeping statue, and on deserted roadway, feeling a great calm creep over him under the influence of the solitude and the silence.

The streets were almost empty when at length he rose to go, crossing the Piazza di Spagna, and passing through the Corso on the road to his own not far distant apartments. He had soon reached the side street in which his studio was situated, and was walking slowly down it as the church bells all around him clanged out one o'clock. As they did so, he paused for a moment for one last look at the midnight sky and the myriad stars. Not a soul had been visible in the street as he entered it; but now a footstep suddenly sounded behind

him—so near, that the person, whoever it were, must have stepped out from the shadows of an adjoining doorway. The movement was sufficiently unexpected to cause Ino to turn his head, more however in curiosity than in fear. But he saw little. For, as he turned, something struck him in the side—something that felt like ice and numbed his senses. And stretching out his hands impotently, heaven and earth faded from before his eyes; and, with a faint cry, he fell forward upon his face. He did not hear the step come closer still, and pause beside him; neither did he see the anxious gaze with which for a moment the assassin contemplated his work ere he turned and with noiseless, rapid steps, disappeared down the street.

Meanwhile Raffaelino Bartolucci lay without life or motion stretched out upon the stone pavement, the moon looking pitilessly down upon the white face and upturned, ghastly eyes, and glancing horribly upon the little pool of blood which had made its way from his wounded side. It was a quiet and

retired street, this viacolo in which the sculptor lived ; and for more than an hour he lay, his life-blood slowly ebbing out, before any Samaritan footstep approached to have pity upon him.

Dawn was scarcely more than breaking when a hurried peal at Signora Scalchi's bell disturbed Bianca, sullen and indignant, from her heavy slumbers. Benedetta too, had heard the bell, wondering what could be its meaning ; but, when a few moments later, a loud shriek echoed from Bianca's lips, she hastily flung on a wrapper and rushed out into the corridor.

A maid-servant with flushed cheeks and tearful eyes was standing at the entrance door ; and Bianca, her hands upraised, was giving vent to a succession of terrified exclamations. On seeing Benedetta she darted towards her.

"Ah, signorina!" she exclaimed, "they have murdered the Signor Ino ! He is dying—you must go to him quick ! They found him in a pool of blood close to his own door last night. Ah, Jesu ! the poor signor !"

Benedetta reeled and caught at her companion for support, as, with a blanched face, she moved towards the doorway.

“It is too true, signorina,” said the other girl, who seemed almost beside herself with excitement; “they brought him in at two this morning with a terrible wound in his side. He has been stabbed by some one. They cannot stop the bleeding, and the doctor says he will not live many hours. He has asked for you. Ah, come quick, signorina, for the love of God! I must return. Wou’d but Our Lady, spare the young signor, I would give my right hand! Never was there one so good, so kind, so generous as he.” And she burst out weeping as she hurried down the palace stairs.

For one moment after she had gone, Benedetta stood motionless, steadying herself against the little table that stood behind the door. The shock was so awful, so overwhelming. It seemed so impossible to realise Ino, in his strong young manhood and pride of life, lying low, struck by the hand of an assassin, and

bleeding to death ! The next minute, still feeling as if in a dream, she turned back and entered the Maestro's room. It was as she feared. The old man had heard the tidings in the abrupt fulness of their horror. He was sitting up in bed, trembling so exceedingly that the couch on which he lay shook beneath him ; anguish on his face, and his crippled hands clasped together in the attitude of one who prays for mercy. She had no need to tell him anything. And, indeed, when she tried to speak, she found that horror had robbed her of her voice, and that her words came forth in an almost inarticulate whisper.

“ I have heard it all,” he said in quavering tones. “ Go, go—quick—do not delay. Let him see you before he die. *I cannot go to him.* Ah, Ino, my son, my son ! ”

Once, twice, Benedetta placed her trembling lips to his forehead, and caught the clasped hands in hers ; then, without uttering a word, she left him, and passed back into her own room. It was the work of but two or three minutes to dress herself ; yet it seemed to her

as if her shaking hands took an untold time over their business.

The morning air was cool and grey as she hurried out into the street, and a shiver passed over her as the early breeze met her flushed cheeks. A feeling of sickness oppressed her as she paused beside the sculptor's door and her eye fell upon the dark marks which stained the rough stones a few yards off, marking the place where Ino had been struck down by a cowardly hand, and where he had lain, silent and unconscious, during that cruel hour which elapsed before assistance reached him. Might it not have been possible that, had help come sooner, his life might have been spared, and her old playmate not be lying now before the gates of Death? The thought was pain too terrible to be endured; and hastily but softly Benedetta entered the house.

On the threshold she was met by the medical man, who looked curiously into her face. "I have done all I can for him," he said; "nothing more is possible. The bleed-

ing has ceased now, but there is no hope. A few hours will see the end; it is a vital wound. Do not excite him; or the wound will break out afresh, and then the end will be rapid."

Benedetta simply bowed her head without reply. But, at the door, the young doctor turned, and once more faced her. "Can you give any clue," he asked abruptly, "from your acquaintance with Signor Bartolucci, as to the identity of his assassin?"

This question had not as yet, strangely enough, presented itself before her; her mind had been too full of Ino to turn even to the subject of Ino's murderer. But now, without a moment's pause for reflection, she answered almost unconsciously, in a cold, calm tone, "It must be, I think, the Conte della Coschia."

Her companion gazed at her with a startled look; surprised perhaps by the apathy of her tone. But, if Ino were to die, what mattered it by whose hand he had fallen? The moment of revengeful desire might come; but at the present moment, she could think of no one

but himself—could only yearn to be with him and chafe at these delays.

“No,” said Doctor Rossi, “*that* cannot be. This man was tall and thin; the Conte is of middle height and stout. This much I got from the wounded man so soon as he recovered consciousness. (‘Unless indeed,’ he muttered to himself, ‘he hired someone to do his work for him; which is more than possible, seeing that il Signor Conte has the reputation of a coward.’)” And lifting his hat, he turned away.

A moment later, and she stood with beating heart in Ino’s room. The young man lay upon his bed only partially undressed—for the doctor had feared by the slightest movement to bring on a return of the terrible hemorrhage—supported nearly upright by a pile of pillows, his closed eyes, and the ghastly pallor of his face giving him already the appearance of death. As, however, her footsteps passed the threshold, his eyes opened, and a smile of ineffable satisfaction crossed his features; whilst the elderly woman who had been attending to him, and

who had the care of his rooms, rose up, offering her chair to Detta, and herself retiring to the window-seat a few yards off.

There was no greeting between the two as Benedetta sat down beside her old playmate ; for words were forbidden to the dying man, and the girl's heart was too full to speak. Had she opened her lips, she feared that she could not have restrained the torrent of grief that pressed upon her so sorely. But, as she took his nerveless hand in hers and looked with pain unspeakable into his pale face, he smiled again—a smile meant to convey at once consolation and love—pity for her, and resignation for himself. It was a smile that unnerved her more than the sight of his prostration.

The little thought he bestowed upon himself seemed but to add to her passionate regret for one so unselfish among the sons of men. And if indeed the Conte were his murderer, as her instincts told her, then it was by reason of her—in consequence of his chivalrous protection of her—that this darling friend and brother of her childhood had met his

end. Ah! Why had she been so quick to call for help that luckless day on the Palazzo stairs? Ah, why had Ino returned that evening? And the very thing which at the time had seemed a Providence, now appeared to her as typical of the strange irony of fate.

Presently he moved slightly, creeping a little nearer to her with something of the shy longing we sometimes see expressed on the face of a dumb animal. And the woman at the window rose and came towards them, the tears streaming down her honest cheeks.

“Il povero, signor!” she said; “he wants to be moved.”

And with her strong arms she lifted him tenderly close to his companion, and laid him with his head against Benedetta’s shoulder. She had been young too, ah, yes! when she had wandered through the ilex groves upon the slopes of Tivoli with her Giulio many, many years ago, when her cheeks were round and smooth, and the down had but just begun to grow upon his upper lip. She had listened

to the nightingales, as they paced along, side by side, among the deepening shadows of the overhanging walks ; and there had been a look in his eyes then as he bent towards her, whispering passionate words of love and constancy, like the look now filling the young signor's eyes.

So, without a word, she raised him up and placed his head where her Giulio's head had often lain ; little doubting, from the expression of anguish on Benedetta's face, that the signorina loved him as—it was easy to see—he loved her.

And so for long there was silence in the quiet room, when the daylight entered, more and more fully to light up the three motionless figures ; a silence so intense that the ticking of the little marble clock upon the mantelpiece sounded strangely harsh and loud. The sun was now rising, and there was stir sufficient in the streets, where the early housekeepers of Rome were already starting on their morning errands ; but the sculptor's room looked out upon the other side, upon some gardens, where acacias swayed

softly to and fro, and where a faint scent rose up from orange-trees ; and here there was no sound of the outside town.

Presently Benedetta stretched out her hand to reach the cordial which was to be given at stated intervals to the wounded man ; and, having swallowed the liquid, Ino looked towards her with meaning in his eyes, gently touching her hand, and at the same time lifting one of his own fingers—a finger on which sparkled a gem of considerable value. It was a diamond ring that had been given to him by a Florentine magnate, to mark his approbation of some artistic work which the young man had carried out with unexpected success.

Divining the thought in his mind, she drew the ring from his finger, and saw by his face that she had understood him rightly. Then she paused.

“ For whom ? ” she whispered.

He answered nothing in words ; but with a feeble hand, tried to place the jewel upon one of her own fingers.

Seeing that his strength was insufficient

even for this slight effort, and that he would not be happy unless she carried out his intentions, she herself slipped it on her slender middle finger. Why should she thwart him? A diamond, of whatever value, was of little moment to her now. There were no friends, she well knew, so dear to Ino as the Maestro and herself; neither had the young sculptor any earthly relative left who might in after days accuse her of robbing them of the dead man's possessions. He should have his own way now in this as well as in anything else he chose to ask. She merely bent and pressed her lips to the pale brow that in the dawning brightness of the summer day seemed to grow more and more akin to the cold fleshless appearance of one of his own marble statues.

But, dying though he were, her kiss had power to bring a faint flush into the colourless cheeks, and a gleam of joy into his eyes. A moment later he spoke for the first time.

"May God bless you *both*!" he said in a whisper; with an accent on the last word

which, strangely enough, seemed to tell her to whom he referred. Her grief could no longer be controlled.

There are moments—sacred moments—when even the selfish emotions of love are over-mastered by those of a tender, life-long friendship.

“Ino, Ino!” she exclaimed, while the scorching tears rained from her eyes; “I would rather I had never met him—rather I had never thought of him—sooner than to see you lying here!”

But the next moment with a strong effort she controlled herself; for at the sight of her grief, the sick man’s face had changed; and the elder woman rose hastily.

“Signorina, signorina,” she said, “you must not weep, you must not agitate him. Il Signor Medico bade us keep him quiet, or he will die.”

And already, before she had finished speaking, Detta’s agitation had passed, and she had even recalled a wan smile to her sorrowful features.

“The Maestro —” whispered Ino once more ;

and she answered his thoughts with forced calm.

“I will never forsake him, Ino mio ; he shall be my care so long as he lives.”

Ino smiled again ; and his eyes closed softly as he seemed to fall into a gentle sleep, his face still lying against her breast, and the little clock ticking on more loudly and more harshly than before.

When again he roused himself, the sunshine was just beginning to penetrate through the venetian blinds which shaded the open window. The woman who still sat near hastily held the stimulant to his lips.

“He is dying !” she said.

But Ino refused it, turning his face once more towards Benedetta. She had to bend her ear to catch the faint low words which were the last he spoke.

“He will come—soon !” he whispered ; trying to discern her features through the dazzling gleam of the morning sun that perplexed death’s rising mists.

And even at that moment, a smile came to his lips. For he had done for her the only

service left for love to do ; the assassin's knife had come too late to frustrate that last sacrifice of unselfish loyalty.

And with the smile still lingering on his lips, he died.



CHAPTER X.

AN UNEXPECTED LEGACY.

INO'S death was a blow from which the Maestro never rallied. For five-and-twenty years, as boy and man, the young Italian had been dear to him, both by reason of his artistic sympathies as well as of his many noble qualities; having indeed, since Annunciata's death and Pippo's departure, become his daily companion and adopted son.

After that terrible shock the old man never seemed himself again. His mind often wandered; he grew feebler, and would pass whole days without speech or movement, apparently almost without consciousness. He took little if any interest now in the things which surrounded him—the outer world, its cares and occupations, seemed to have faded from his remembrance; and even Benedetta's

voice could not always arouse him from his mental lethargy. At other times he would be lost apparently in memories of the past ; and she, listening to his rambling words, felt sometimes greatly moved ; for their subject was often herself or her dead mother—that mother whom the old musician had adored so silently in the days of his youth and strength. He spoke with equal tenderness of both, and sometimes in his failing memory confused the two. “I love her,” she heard him once murmuring sadly to himself, “but she will never care for me. That is natural—I am old for her—she is young and gay ; but why does she not love Ino ? Poor Ino ! it is hard that she should not fancy him—his whole heart is given to her. Poor lad, poor lad !” Or he would dream that Benedetta was once again a little child, living beneath ’Nunciata’s care as in the old days. “She looks pale, my good Annunciata—the little one ; we must send her out into the country for a week or so—my poor Ned’s child must not be neglected. Ned, Ned !” he suddenly went on, as if to

the living man, "you must take heart again! Cheer up, lad, you have genius; you *must* get on some day. Believe in yourself, dear boy, if you wish to make others believe in you. Olinta—God bless her! Olinta will not let you mope like this when you are married."

Always the some unselfishness, always the same thoughtfulness for others, the same forgetfulness of self! And Detta's eyes, as she sat beside him, filled with tears of a tender admiration. But it was Ino chiefly on whom he dwelt; Ino in his gentle childhood, or the pleasant promise of youth; and to his name he generally returned. "Take care of the little one, Ino," he would often say, "she is our own Piccola, is she not? Ah, Ino mio, some day you will have to look after the Piccola for good when I am gone!" And Ino was in his grave, while he lay rambling on! Then he would start up, clasping his hands wildly. "Ino, Ino! he is dead, you know it, Detta. Ah, God! my son! my son! Would to God I could have died for you, my son!"

During this time of trouble, old Moroni, his former friend and associate—a man of simple mind and kindly heart—came often to enquire after him ; and sometimes to sit for a few moments beside the bed, gazing compassionately upon his altered face, or striving, with well-meant efforts, to cheer up Benedetta's failing spirits. Struck with compunction for the girl's loneliness, he sometimes also brought his niece, Teresa, with him to spend a morning with the signorina, and to share her trying solitude. Teresa was a bright-faced, modest, gentle-hearted girl, who speedily developed an admiring affection for her half-English companion, and whose friendship grew in time to be something of a solace to Detta in her trouble.

Ino's murderer was never traced. The Roman police are not perhaps at any time remarkably active or intelligent ; and in this case, there were neither relations nor friends to press forward the inquiry. The young sculptor had always been of a reticent and retiring disposition ; he had made but few intimate friends ; and although his character

and talents were such as to gain the respect and admiration of those who came into contact with him, yet there was not one perhaps among his neighbours singled out to be his especial comrade, his Damon or his Jonathan. The doctor had his own notions, but he had no wish to push them forward. He was an honest, kindly young fellow, but not above his neighbours in points of morality, and little inclined to take upon him the rôle of public prosecutor, to the detriment of his own interests. It was not, he considered, incumbent upon him to name his suspicions—which were purely conjectural, and based chiefly upon the passing words of an excited girl—to the emissaries of the law. They must do their own work for themselves. And, even supposing the girl's surmise to be correct, it was not his place to interfere in what was probably a love-brawl between two young men. So he dismissed the matter from his mind.

There was no doubt, however, in Benedetta's mind as to who it was that planned, if he did not execute, the cowardly deed. And

two others there were, boon companions of the Conte della Coschia, who shrugged their shoulders with a mutual glance of silent meaning when they heard of the assassination, recalling a certain oath, a threat, which had passed his lips, and a murderous gleam which had filled his eyes on the occasion of his last meeting with the young sculptor.

For a day or two the foul deed created a sensation in the city. Raffaelino's name, though scarcely as yet to be called famous, was beginning to be well-known among artists and connoisseurs as that of a man of promise; and among these, for a short time, his early death was a subject of interest and compassion. But there are no lack of excitements in Rome. For the idlest there is plenty to see, plenty to hear, and plenty to do. New themes speedily take the place of the old, and the premature end of even a moderately well-known or interesting person is soon forgotten. Ere a week was over Ino's few possessions had been sold, his rooms re-let, and the horrible deed more than half-forgotten even by the very women who had helped to lay

the bleeding figure on the bed, quickly-moved tears flowing from their eyes ; while, perhaps, save for those two—the old man and the young girl, in the Palazzo Carbone—there were few friends or acquaintances troubled by more than a passing memory of the pale face now hid away beneath the cold earth in a shady corner of the cemetery. With these two, however, his memory was not likely to fade, and perhaps there were few others for whose fond remembrance the young man would have craved.

Subdued as she was by grief, and by the nervous shock of Ino's death, it seemed for a time as if Benedetta's whole nature had become changed, and as if the active, cheerful girl were developing into a sad-eyed, lethargic dreamer. There was so little to do during these long hot days—no necessary work or activity of any kind—that sometimes she felt startled to remember how the hours had passed, aimlessly, unconsciously, occupied solely in melancholy thought.

It was, perhaps, no bad thing for her when, before long, an incident occurred, effectually

arousing her from the monotony of this inactive life. This was the arrival of a bewildering letter from Miss Sparke, containing two important pieces of news, both wholly unexpected. The first was the announcement of Lady Dumbarton's death. She had had another long illness; but the end was somewhat sudden, the gout having flown to a vital part. Miss Sparke's letter was a strange conglomeration of spite and of enforced politeness, of an evident wish to ingratiate herself with Benedetta, combined with an equal inability to conceal her old feelings of jealousy. She had been left a moderate legacy, which she appeared to consider by no means commensurate with her deserts; and the dispositions of her employer's will clearly filled her with an acrid displeasure she could not disguise. She had, however, for reasons best known to herself, written full particulars of Lady Dumbarton's illness, death, and will, to her favourite niece, informing the latter at the same time that this was an attention bestowed only upon herself, and by no means extended to Mrs.

Drew or her mother, to whom the barest notification of the facts had been all that she had troubled herself to send.

“I congratulate you,” wrote Miss Sparke, “on your new riches. Knowing from experience the exigencies of straitened means, I am happy to think that your future life will be smoothed by the possession of so large an income. Certainly there is no calculating the eccentricities of the best of people, and your aunt was not more consistent than many others into whose company I have been tossed upon the cold waves of a stormy life. She appeared to entertain a stronger regard, if I may say so, for those who thwarted her plans and disregarded her wishes, than for those who spent their life in her service and only lived to anticipate her wants. It is an ungrateful world, but *I* am not one to put forward my own claims or complain of the injustice of others. During her last illness, your aunt begged me, should it prove fatal, to forward to you this message. ‘Give her my dear love,’ she said, ‘and tell her that I

am sorry now that I quarrelled with her on the matter of her going to Rome to nurse her old friend. She was quite right, and I ought not to have thwarted her. Ask her, for the sake of one whom I once told her she resembled, to think sometimes with affection of her dead aunt.' She made me write the message down at the time that I might not forget it ; and as I am of those who consider a promise sacred, and would remit no obligation even towards one who, like your deceased aunt, was not fully appreciative of my disinterested care, I forward it to you as it left her lips. I can only add that I would have already left Steynton Court had it not been for the possibility that by remaining here until hearing from you, I might be able to be of use in the case of any new arrangements, or the chance of your desiring at once to make this your residence."

Benedetta's eyes filled with tears as she read the message from the dead woman, who, in her last days, had thought lovingly of her in conjunction with the long lost, dark-eyed

daughter—the idol of her youth. Who could tell how long the stern, reserved, silent woman had in her heart repented of the severity she had shown her niece, and silently yearned for a return of the young voice, for the caresses which so few were invited or inclined to give her?

She scarcely noticed the ridiculous self-glorifications or the veiled inuendos of Miss Sparke's not over-pleasant letter. She even forgot to speculate over the nature and amount of the new riches of which her correspondent spoke ; as she sat recalling past days amongst those Yorkshire hills, and thinking with a kindly tenderness of the woman deemed by the world, perhaps justly, so harsh and so self-contained, but who had shown to her not only generosity but love and confidence.

That Steynton Court was hers—that it had been left her in Lady Dumbarton's will, there could be little doubt from Miss Sparke's letter ; but for the rest she was completely in the dark, and could form no idea of the amount of her aunt's legacy. The thought of acquired

wealth perplexed—almost startled her, for, not being of a practical turn of mind according to the standard of the young women of the present day, she had never paid any particular attention to Eveleen's half-jocular remarks upon the likelihood of her becoming her aunt's heiress; nor indeed had she ever troubled herself to speculate over the matter in her own mind. Had she done so, she would certainly have told herself that, whatever might have been her chances before in this direction, she had abruptly put an extinguisher upon them the day that she left the Court, contrary to Lady Dumbarton's express commands, to proceed to Rome. She little knew that this very contumacious action of hers, had, instead of working against her interests, served rather as an additional inducement to her aunt to provide for one who paid so little regard to her own pecuniary interests. But the same day there came, by the evening post, another letter, containing full particulars of Lady Dumbarton's will as affecting herself. This letter was from the London firm of lawyers who had always

transacted the business of the deceased lady, and ran thus :

“MADAM,—We are happy to inform you that, under the conditions of the will of your deceased aunt, the late Lady Dumbarton, of Steynton Court, Yorkshire, you are entitled to a legacy of twenty thousand pounds at present invested chiefly in railway shares, and free of charge or incumbrance whatever. Also to the fine property of Steynton Court, which is a freehold unincumbered by mortgage. Awaiting your commands, we are, madam, your obedient servants,

“TRENCH AND COUTTS.”

There is no romance about a lawyer's letter. Facts are expressed in the plainest of terms and the most concise of statements; and, with this legal document in her hands, Benedetta, for the first time, felt that she was indeed a rich woman, and that her new possessions were not a dream but a reality. There was no particular exultation in her mind—exultation is not possible to those who have had

their very heart-strings wrung by scenes such as she had lately taken part in—but there was the strong contentment of relief, as she thanked Providence that now, at any rate, the Maestro's last days were provided for, and that she could surround her old friend with every comfort of life of any service to one in his forlorn condition.

She told him the news that evening in the presence of old Moroni and his niece. He listened, but made no comment until Moroni had spoken.

“Well, old friend, this is grand news, is it not?”

“Yes, yes,” he replied automatically “But it will not bring us back our Ino.”

The next moment, however, he turned his face towards her, stretching out his hand with that wistful movement which was so touchingly suggestive of the helplessness of his infirmity

“You are young, my Piccola,” he said, apologetically. “It is well; I am glad for your sake.”

But, if to the blind and broken hearted

man, slowly fading out of life and its cares and its interests, the girl's communication was of little moment, it was not so with Moroni or his niece. They overwhelmed Benedetta with congratulations; and in their warm-hearted sympathy, showed almost as much excitement as if a legacy had been left to themselves. Teresa's large dark eyes dilated with emotion as she heard of her friend's newly acquired riches. She fell upon Benedetta's neck and kissed her repeatedly, quite unable adequately to express her feelings; whilst Moroni jumped up and wrung her hand in an access of friendly delight.

"Ah!" said Teresa, half smiling, half serious, "I shall be afraid of you now, Signorina—now that you have become a rich, grand Englishwoman."

"Little goose!" replied Detta, stopping her mouth with a caress.

"We must wish you joy on the occasion in proper style," said Moroni. "We must have a fixed meeting to commemorate it, and to drink your long life and prosperity in the

enjoyment of your new possessions. We will come again to-morrow night, may we not, and hold a little festa? I will bring a bottle of Asti spumante in my pocket, and my violin shall come with me. And after we have drank your happiness, we will have an overture in your honour. I will play, and Teresa here shall sing; and you also, signorina, must give us a song."

For a moment, the thought flashed through the girl's mind that all this friendly rejoicing was but an unseemly way of commemorating the death of one who had been good to her, and for whom in life she had felt an affection which, although not very deep, had been sincere; but she had not the heart to reject the proposal made with so much pride and joy by her simple-hearted companions, while she could not help smiling at the excitement displayed by the usually calm and somewhat taciturn elderly musician.

"And," continued the latter, "I will on this occasion, if you will permit me, signorina, take the opportunity of introducing my nephew-in-law elect, Signor

Giovanni Toscani. He also is a musician, and he too shall bring his violin and play a fantasia in your honour."

Accordingly, the next evening the whole party arrived; and, after the preliminary congratulations and the drinking of the Asti wine, a couple of hours were spent in the performance of music of no mean order. Signor Toscani was a tall, good-looking young man, evidently much admired by his *fiancée*, for whom he appeared to entertain a satisfactory affection. He was a member of the orchestra to which Moroni belonged, of fair education and of good prospects; and, saving for the slight fault of an almost exaggerated courtesy of manner and excess of compliment in speech, was outwardly well mannered enough to Detta's criticising eyes. And as the two violins blended together, rising and falling alternately in rapid entreaty or passionate wail in a concerto of Beethoven's, she leant back closing her eyes, entranced, scarcely hearing Teresa's murmur in her ear.

"Ah, Dio! does he not play beautifully?"

Whilst even the Maestro roused himself from his usual apathy, and listened with clasped hands and a slow smile creeping over his wan face, to the rare strains of that harmonious duet.

“Play it again, play it again,” he said, in a trembling voice so soon as they had finished. And the two musicians without demur did as they were requested, repeating the piece even more perfectly than before. It was many months since sounds such as these had swelled through the empty space of Cortauld’s long room.

Never had music of such weird and touching beauty vibrated against the old Palazzo walls since the days when he and his old friend, before his illness, had in like manner sat side by side mingling the tones of their instruments. When for the second time they paused, there was a silence of several moments before Detta turned to thank the new comer, with the conviction that here was one whose talents were not unlikely to gain him promotion before long. Meanwhile, the Maestro was softly fingering his

own violin. His paralysed right hand and arm refused to hold and use the bow, but with his stiffened left fingers he touched a note here and there fondly.

“You must sing to us now, signorina,” observed Moroni, turning towards her. “That will be a treat indeed for Signor Toscani, who has never heard you.”

“She has a beautiful voice,” murmured with generosity little Teresa, who already in her sweet, slight, tuneful way, had sung a canzonetta or two.

“Ah, do not refuse us, signorina !” pleaded Signor Toscani.

“Stop,” said the Maestro ; “and I will play your accompaniment—Piccola, you shall sing them ‘Lascia ch’io pianga.’”

This was one of his favourite songs of old ; one which he well knew peculiarly suited the full rich notes of the girl’s voice. In those days he had been accustomed to accompany her with many a grand chord, sweeping run or delicate shake ; and he could not bear now to relinquish to others the task in which he had delighted. But the pizzicato

harmonies now touched by his feeble fingers were few and faint, although sweet in tone ; and when he had finished, and the singer's last words—words that seemed so sadly appropriate to him—" *Lascia ch'io pianga la dura sorte, e che sospiri la libertà !* " had died away, he sighed with an expression of mingled pain and pleasure on his face—pleasure due to the hearing of the rich young voice he loved, and pain due to the realisation of his own lost powers. Never more would his fingers run with their old lightning rapidity up and down the strings of his favourite instrument ; never more should he make music to charm the hearts of men, and to wrap his own soul in a golden dream, from which this world with its harsh realities and unlovely cares was banished ! And with a weary heart he dropped his violin and once more lay down again.

The next day arrived letters of congratulation from Mrs. Wilding and Eveleen Drew. Both were expressed with much heartiness, and contained one or two interesting facts regarding Lady Dumbarton's will which

Miss Sparke, either because she wished to avoid uncongenial topics, or because she supposed Benedetta to be already cognisant of them, had omitted to mention.

Lady Dumbarton, it appeared, had not forgotten Eva; she had, however, in vindication of her small personal regard and her lifelong conviction of the frivolous nature of this niece, left the legacy (which amounted to the sum of ten thousand pounds)—not to her but to her husband, Major Drew. “As we are not likely to be divorced, this is a fact of little importance,” wrote Eva. “It shows, *I* think, that if I hadn’t married Arthur, I should have got nothing at all; but Arthur says it shows the relentings of her conscience, which an innate pride forced her to veil in this delicate manner. I’m afraid I think the motives of very little consequence so long as we get possession of the hard cash! For we did really rather want it, *Detta mia*. Poor aunt! peace be to her ashes! I have no reason to quarrel with her now; for I never expected to benefit by a penny of hers. And I am quite overjoyed

at the handsome lump she has left to you. It is rather hard on mama, though, of course, we both knew she would get nothing from our affectionate relative ; but the only thing that has caused either of us any sincere disappointment is the fact of that wretched old toady and canter, Miss Sparke, making hay to the amount of five hundred pounds. I am a mean creature, dear Detta ; I am not half so generous as you, I fear ! ”

There was certainly little meanness about Eva's natural disposition ; yet Benedetta, as she laid her cousin's letter down, was conscious that it had jarred somewhat upon her

It would be difficult, she felt, for Eveleen to enter into her own feelings on the matter ; to her, Lady Dumbarton had been nothing more than a stiff, unsympathetic, harshly judging relative. But to Detta, who had always perceived the natural integrity and justice of her aunt's character, who had nursed her in her weakness and had seen her softer side, had been avowedly loved too by the dead woman, there seemed for the

moment something unpleasantly hard and flippant in her cousin's light remarks. Our judgment usually softens towards those who lie in their graves, more especially if they have at any time shown the least regard for us ; and, as the girl read over that part of Eveleen's letter which repeated to her the words in which her aunt had embodied the gift of her own legacy—"to my dearest niece, Benedetta Campbell, who has shown me much kindness, and whom may God bless and preserve, if He will, to a long and prosperous life"—her heart filled with a sudden flood of compassion for the memory of this woman of cold and unattractive exterior, so little framed to excite in others spontaneous affection.

For the rest, only a portion—barely half in fact —of her fortune was left by the deceased woman to her relatives and dependents. The other half was bequeathed in equal proportions to four well-known London hospitals, with the request that her name might be attached to the new wards thus endowed. Was this because she, who through life, had

made so few friends, desired—with that vague yearning for the good word and the regard of our fellow-creatures which at times infects the sternest and most self-contained of persons—by this means to perpetuate her grateful memory in the hearts of suffering men and women, who, exchanging their neglected misery for skilled nursing and necessary comforts, should rise up and call her blessed?

It may well have been so. But it is not perhaps astonishing that the relations of the rich should hold in highest esteem that charity which both begins and ends at home; and that Mrs. Wilding, on being put into possession of the substance of her half-sister's will, and in view of her own previous losses and her present legacy of fifty pounds, should remark sardonically that to wear crêpe for Maria would be a foolish extravagance on her part, and quite an insult to the memory of so extremely sincere a woman.

CHAPTER XI.

ALONE IN THE PALAZZO.

A FEW weeks later Teresa Moroni and Signor Toscani were united in the bonds of wedlock. "Come and see me married, dear signorina," little Teresa had said to her friend; and Benedetta, accompanied by Bianca, who had expressed a desire also to witness the ceremony, did as she had been requested. There was to be no wedding breakfast or fuss of any sort; the young couple were to be married quite simply, and afterwards go for a few days' holiday to the neighbourhood of Albano. The service was at an early hour in the morning; and Detta, as she made her way through the streets which even at eight o'clock were close and stifling, as much perhaps with the exhalations of the last

day's sun as with the new warmth of the present cloudless morning, felt inclined to envy her friend her pleasant sojourn amid the cool shade and sweet pure air of Albano.

The service was soon over, and after shaking hands with the blushing bride and her good-looking bridegroom, and having seen them depart towards their carriage at the foot of the church steps, Detta prepared with a half-sigh to follow them. She should miss Teresa, her simple-hearted, affectionate little companion of the last few weeks; and cordially she hoped that Signor Toscani would know how to appreciate so guileless and loving a bride. Her mind was full of the two as she descended the steps, Bianca beside her.

At the bottom of them a little knot of men was standing conversing with another on horseback; and Benedetta as she neared them, raised her eyes for a moment. Her glance fell upon the figure on horseback, and seemed arrested there. She had in fact no power to turn away her eyes, as she

stood just above him, rooted to the spot, an inexpressible horror gathering upon her features.

The man whom she thus regarded so fixedly paused for a moment in his conversation, losing the thread of his discourse: then, as that uncomfortable gaze still remained fixed upon him, and seeing that the attention of his friends had been aroused, he bent forward in his saddle, bowing with an unmistakable air of bravado. “Good morning, signorina,” he said, his lips curling into an uncomfortable smile.

But at the sound of his voice, a shudder passed over the girl. The string of her own tongue seemed loosened; and trembling all over with a passion she could not have defined—whether of terror, indignation or abhorrence—the burning words flowed unconsciously from her lip.

“*You?*” she said, catching her breath, “*you* dare to speak to me again? It was you who murdered him—him, Ino Bartolucci!” The next moment a mist swam before her eyes; and, with a sudden pain

at her heart, she fell forward upon the marble steps.

When she recovered consciousness she was driving through the streets in a hired carriage, supported by Bianca. There was a sharp smarting pain at her forehead ; and putting up her hand, she found that it was bleeding profusely.

“ Ah ! ” said her companion, who began to scold her the moment she opened her eyes ; “ that is what you got by falling on the steps ; and no wonder ! It is a mercy you did not kill yourself. You must have been mad, signorina. Ah, Dio ! what a thing to do ! To stand upon the public church steps and make an accusation of murder ! And to a rich, well-born gentleman like the Conte della Coschia ! It is a wonder that you are not now in the hands of the police. What a disgrace ! I would that I had not come out with the signorina this morning ! ”

Benedetta was still too faint and weak to make any response to these selfish complaints ; she only shrank away from Bianca, feeling how different was the nature of this girl from

that of her old friend Bettina; and longing for the painful jolting upon the roughly paved streets to be over. When at length they reached the Palazzo, she was thankful to retire to her own little room; and with an aching head to lie down, her heart sore with the burden of her thoughts.

Not perhaps since the day of his death, had the untimely fate of Ino moved her to so tender and so poignant a regret. It had seemed so terrible to see this man—the one whom she told herself she knew to be his murderer, alive and well and prosperous, surrounded by friends, with a smile upon his false lips; whilst Ino, cut down by his hand, lay cold and forgotten in the adjacent cemetery. How was it that the bad, the cruel, and the vicious lived on in wealth, in happiness, in popularity, undisturbed—whilst the blood of one, good, useful and innocent, cried in vain for vengeance from the silent grave?

She rose up presently, wandering about aimlessly. She could not lie still with that fever in her veins—the fever of re-awakened

grief for her friend, of passionate and impotent indignation against his destroyer.

Her heart was too full of absorbing emotions and of memories of the past for her to take much heed of her ordinary surroundings. And afterwards she remembered with a pang, that she had been too pre-occupied to think much of the Maestro that day; and that she had paid but little attention to his more than usually drowsy and lethargic condition.

She was awakened the next morning from the heavy sleep of exhaustion by the sound of a stir outside her door, followed by a scream from the maid-servant.

“Signorina, signorina!” exclaimed Bianca, rushing into her room.

But, before she had time to speak further, she was followed by Signora Scalchi, who placed a hand across her mouth.

“Be silent, you fool!” she said, pushing the girl as she spoke out of the room. But Benedetta had already sprung out of bed.

“What is it?” she asked, full of apprehension.

“The signor has had another fit,” said her companion, approaching the girl with more of kindness in her manner than she had ever before shown to her young lodger.

“The Maestro? I will go to him.” And Benedetta hastily flung a dressing-gown over her shoulders. But the signora placed herself in her way.

“Do not go, signorina,” she said. “He will not know you.” And she took the girl’s hand, trying to force her to re-seat herself.

“He is dead!” exclaimed Benedetta with a glance into her face.

“Ah, il povero signor! He has been dead these three or four hours. He is quite cold. He must have died in his sleep. But comfort yourself, signorina; there is no pain upon his face; he must have passed away peacefully ”

And so, thus abruptly, fell the blow which had indeed been long expected and long delayed, but which at the end, as so often happens, seemed to find Detta all unprepared to meet it.

Many of us may have remarked how rarely it is the case that bereavements come singly. Death has a strange cruel fashion when he has struck down one of our friends, of following up the loss with another and a third. It seems as if the thirst for possession in our unseen foe grew with its very gratification, and insisted upon a yet fuller satisfaction.

It would perhaps be impossible for a young girl to be in a much lonelier position than was Benedetta now; and even Signora Scalchi, as she watched the mournful figure keeping its silent watch in the room where her old friend, with his hands at rest and a serene calm upon the wearied features, lay waiting to be carried to his long last home, felt a thrill of compassion for the almost friendless signorina. She showed considerable kindness to her, taking all the arrangements of the funeral, connected with the English church and ritual though it were, off her hands; and when towards evening the sad moment came that the body must be carried away, to remain all

night in the mortuary, leading her with rough sympathy to her own chamber, and striving to console her with well meant words.

She would not let the girl return alone to the now empty room—from which even the figure that outlined itself upon the bed, beneath the snowy sheet sprinkled with sweet-scented flowers, had been removed. She tried to persuade her to come and sit with herself and Bianca in the little parlour leading out of the kitchen; and when she found that was impossible, brought her work and sat beside her in the Maestro's room, making some remark every now and then, or asking some question intended to distract her thoughts, but in reality scarcely heard by her companion.

Detta's mind was far away, dwelling upon the days of her childhood and those whose love had hedged it round—one and all of whom had now been swept away, and she alone left. Perhaps too reproaching herself needlessly, as we so often do on such occasions, with the tormenting thought that—had

she but known it was his last day upon earth—how tenderly she would have caressed her old friend the evening before, how she would have striven to earn from him some last word showing consciousness, some last smile of farewell affection.

One observation, however, of the signora's roused her from her mournful reverie, starting thought in a new direction.

“The signorina will return to England, I suppose now?” she remarked. “I shall be sorry; but it would be too lonely for her here. And, once in England, she will marry some fine gentleman—some milord, perhaps—and forget all her troubles.”

Then, with a new sadness at her heart, Benedetta thought of Beresford Conway. Would he have been sorry for her if he could have seen her now in her loneliness and grief? Would he have told her that he still loved her, and perhaps avowed that the letter he wrote about herself and Ino had been dictated not by indifference but by wounded pride? Ah, never before had she so terribly wanted some one to comfort

her ; never before had she known what it was to feel so lost and helpless amid the changes and chances of life, and to yearn so greatly for one who might be both strong and tender—one upon whom she could lean in her trouble and feel assured of consolation.



CHAPTER XII.

INGO'S LETTER—A MISSION FULFILLED.

THE express train from Brindisi to Ancona is not a remarkably rapid one to English sensations, although one of the best of its nation. Neither is the scenery of an exhilarating or particularly interesting character as you wind along the level eastern coast.

To a couple of Englishmen seated together in a first-class compartment of the train, the pace appeared of an irritating deliberation, and the scenery conspicuous by its absence.

But then British subjects in a foreign country, half smothered in dust, and in a hurry to reach their destinations, are proverbially persons of small patience and irritable temper.

They were, however, now nearing the junction where their paths must separate; and both had flung down their books and papers for a last chat before parting.

“You intend going on to Rome, do you not?” remarked the younger of the two to his companion.

“Yes. And you straight through to England?”

“Straight through. I shan’t even stop a day in Paris. You see it is five years since I have seen my people. Do you think of staying long in Rome?”

“I can’t say. Possibly not. But I am in no such hurry as you to return to England. I have only been out of it a little more than a year.”

“True. Have you any thought of returning to Africa?”

“No, I can’t say I have.”

“Out at the diamond fields, weren’t you?”

“For three months. And a beastly place it was.”

“It rarely pays going out to those mines, does it?”

“Well, I don't know. In my case it paid very well. A man has no cause for complaint who finds he can lay out a small capital at the rate of about a thousand per cent.”

“By Jove! Were you doing that?”

Beresford Conway—for it was he—nodded his head.

“Rather better than regimental pay!” remarked his companion. “By the powers! I'd have stuck to the work, if I'd been you.”

“I don't think you would, when you had seen what Kimberley was like—not for long at least.”

“Well,” said the other; “whenever you reach England, I hope you'll look me up. You know my address, I think. Give me yours in Town.”

Beresford took out one of his cards and hastily scribbled a few words upon it.

“We had a pleasant time on board the old boat, had we not?” he said. “I should be glad to meet again.”

On the card was written "Lord Carleton, 375, St. James' Street, Piccadilly "

The younger man stared at the words.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "I never knew you were a lord!"

"No more did I," said Beresford smiling, "until the day before I left the Cape."

"But you gave yourself out as Mr. Conway on board?"

"Yes. I had entered my name so for my cabin, and it didn't seem worth while to bother about a new title. I only heard of my brother's death the morning before I sailed."

"Well," said his companion, "if I had known you were such a swell——"

"I'm not a swell at all. I'm as poor as a church mouse, and have been living amongst the roughs until I've lost all my manners. But here we are approaching the junction."

"When do you reach Rome?" inquired the younger man, as both rose and began to shake off accumulated dust, and to collect their travelling impedimenta.

“ Some time in the middle of the night. It's an awful slow business, is it not ? ”

And as the engine bustled into the noisy and breathless station, the two shook hands cordially, but with that absence of sentiment and that brevity of speech characteristic of Englishmen in their partings with congenial friends ; then separating in their different directions.

About the same time that the shrill whistle of the midnight express echoed through the Roman terminus, Benedetta Campbell, lying in her bed in the little room at the top of the Palazzo, had at length closed her weary eyes and forgotten her sorrows in a fitful, restless slumber.

She was of the age when sleep is an absolute necessity, and when it usually comes at the lightest call ; but her rest to-night was too disturbed to be of any comfort to her, and she rose in the morning unrefreshed, with pale cheeks and dark circles round her eyes.

It was still very early when she dressed herself, and creeping into the empty apart-

ment, knelt down beside the Maestro's bed. It seemed so strange to see the room untenanted—both bed and arm-chair vacant; and to feel that her office of love, her tender ministry to the feeble old man whose spirit still seemed to pervade the place, was for ever over.

Her tears flowed fast, although she wept in silence; and she was too tired, too sorrowful to touch the coffee which presently Bianca brought to her.

She was waiting, wondering when it would be time for her to descend the stairs, and, accompanied by Signora Scalchi, to make her way in the hired carriage towards the English church where the last rites were to be performed over her old friend. She had determined to be there. Only two mourners would the Maestro have—herself and old Moroni; but they would be sincere and loving ones. Yet when the moment came she shrank from the outer world and from the ordeal of the trying service, and felt thankful even for the small consolation of Signora Scalchi's companionship and rough attentions. When, an

hour later, they returned, Bianca met them at the door somewhat eagerly.

“A signor has been here,” she said; “an English signor, I think, inquiring after the signorina. I told him she was gone to the funeral of the old signor; and he said he would call again presently.”

She seemed to expect her news to be of interest; but Benedetta passed her by without remark, not caring even to ask a question regarding her unexpected visitor. Very likely it might be young Richardson, or some one whose coming or going would be of equally little importance to her. The only Englishman whom she would really have cared to see was Major Drew; and he was not likely to be in Rome thus abruptly without her knowledge.

She passed on wearily, and went to the Maestro's room, seating herself in her old favourite place beside the window. She knew the time had come when she must be fixing her plans and making some arrangements for the future. Now that she had no longer any ties in Rome, it would doubtless

be best for her to return to England, and to consult with her relations as to where she should live and what she should do. It might be that the wisest course would be for her to settle down at Steynton Court, inviting Aunt Fanny to share her home. But she was too hot and tired to think about it now ; she would put off all that till the morrow.

One day's rest she must have—a few hours to devote to the memory of the Palazzo life and her dead friends—and then she would set her face towards England, and pack up and depart, bidding farewell, it might be for ever, to this great city of Rome, where two-thirds of her life had been passed, and beneath whose soil lay buried the remains of the two friends, who, since her earliest remembrance, had loved her with a fond and true affection.

She lay back and closed her eyes. She was not asleep ; but her mind had so lost itself in sad absorbing thoughts that sounds outside the room passed by her ear unheard. She did not notice steps that came along the carpeted corridor, and only opened her eyes

when the steps, which were firm and strong, unlike those of Bianca, or her aunt, or old Moroni, came into the room and paused abruptly. And before she rose, the new comer had time to see for a moment the pale face and drooping head so expressive of despondency

But, as the word "Benedetta!" fell upon her ears, she started up, half dazzled by the sun-light's glare, and confused by the sudden interruption of her reverie. Who was there now to call her by her name in that tone of lingering tenderness? For a moment it seemed to her that the dead must have returned to life, and that it was Ino who stood there so softly calling her. But the next she saw that the figure was taller and broader than Ino's, that the tanned face was a fair one, and that the new-comer was one whom she had believed to be many thousand miles away in the heart of South Africa. She remained motionless, gazing up at him, too startled either to move or speak. But, as he repeated her name, approaching her, his eyes full of compassion, all the joy and relief

in her heart suddenly spoke out in her flushed and changing face.

“Will you come to me, Benedetta?” he asked, gravely

And she waited for no further invitation, but came to him without a word, laying her head upon his breast, and feeling, as his arms closed round her, that wonderful peace which is the heritage of those who, after many storms, find themselves at length launched all unexpectedly into calm, untroubled waters.

“Why did you come? How did you know?” she asked, after a pause of happiness—she knew not whether long or short, for—

“To those who walk in Paradise,
The falling feet of Time are stilled—
They know not if he creeps or flies.”

Then, in silence, he took a crumpled paper out of his pocket-book and put it into her hands. The words were very few, and she was startled to see that they were in Ino's handwriting.

‘You are under a mistake. I have never

been anything to the Signorina Campbell but a dear friend ; and she is my beloved sister. If she cares for anyone, it is for you.'

There was no commencement to the letter, neither were there any concluding words save the simple signature, "R. Bartolucci." It had been too hard for the young sculptor to preface or terminate this supreme effort of self-sacrifice by the usual friendly additions.

The tears filled Detta's eyes and ran quickly down her cheeks as she read the two lines written by the dead man ; and, for the first time, realised the full nobility, the perfect generosity, of his conduct towards her. By the date of the letter, she saw that it must have been written the very day of his assassination ; that the hand that penned it was a few hours later cold and stiff, and that it was, perhaps, almost the last action of his life.

So soon as she could control her emotion, she told Beresford all the sad details of Raffaelino's end—a story to which he listened with silent interest—moved more than he chose to show.

Presently, however, as was natural, they turned to other and more personal topics.

“I feel,” said Beresford, “that I am doing a cool thing to ask any woman to marry me—my means being so limited as they are. I don’t wish to trade under false colours, so I state the fact. But you hated me so much when I was rich, Detta, that I fancied I might have a better chance if I came to you as a poor man.”

“Yes,” she said blushing, and with a little childish glee in her voice, “I am the rich one now.”

And she proceeded to tell him of Lady Dumbarton’s legacy

“By Jove!” he said, “if I had known *that*, I don’t think I should ever have had the courage to come to Rome.”

Then, seeing her enquiring, half-frightened look, he pressed his lips to the smooth round cheek which looked so inviting for a kiss.

“Foolish little Detta,” he said, drawing her towards him, “so you would have cared? But, perhaps, even your being an heiress might not have put me off obtaining that

which for two years I had set my heart upon."

"Not two years, Mr. Conway!"

"Beresford, if you please," he said. "Besides, Conway isn't my name now."

"Not your name?"

"No. It's rather a bore. I hope you won't mind. But the truth is, poor Fred's dead, and I've got to be Lord Carleton, you know."

"Oh, Beresford!" she exclaimed in an awe-struck tone.

"Rather a nuisance, isn't it? But it's not my fault, as you'll admit. I expected Fred would have married Miss Alicia Jones, and had a dozen children; but he didn't. He died instead, poor fellow. Well, now you've got all this money, you will be able to start the Model Lodging-Houses whenever you like. Have you forgotten our day in Whitechapel, Dettie, and the night of cousin Fanny's ball, when you first informed me what a defective character I was?"

"Oh, Beresford," she murmured, hiding her face on his breast, "when I think of that

evening, and — and other times, I feel so ashamed of myself——”

“Not at all. Woman’s mission is to regenerate man. And you were quite right. I was a disgustingly lazy, useless fellow.”

“You have worked hard enough the last year,” she said, raising her face. “And you have grown so brown, Beresford, and look so big and strong.”

“And you have grown far lovelier than you were before, or even than I pictured you in my South African dreams, my little Detta.”

“Did you often think of me then, Beresford?”

Now, why is it that during an interesting *tête-à-tête* of this description, some one is invariably found to break in, at the most inopportune moment, upon the lovers? Is it merely to impress us with the uncertain duration of human bliss? Or is it that Puck and Cupid have bound themselves, like Corsican foes, in the toils of an eternal feud? The happy pair were on this occasion so completely engrossed in each other as to be absolutely unconscious of the entrance of the

visitor, who had to cough twice, at first modestly and apologetically, and afterwards spasmodically and half indignantly, before he could succeed in attracting their attention. His presence having been perceived, however, the result was instantaneous and startling; as what was before one, became two with the rapidity of lightning, and Detta, with a face whose hues might have been envied by the peony, advanced to meet the intruder.

This was none other than old Moroni, whose confusion at his *mal apropos* entrance almost rivalled that of the signorina. Recovering herself, however, she performed her part with propriety, introducing the two men to one another

“Signor Moroni is a great friend of mine,” she said to her companion.

“In that case,” he replied, with a humorous smile, “might it not be as well to inform him of the—a—position we hold towards each other?”

This, with considerable embarrassment (but a certain comfort in the reflection that Italian was an unknown tongue to her *fiancée*) Detta

accordingly did. But it was a hard task when she had to translate for her lover's benefit the profuse compliments and many flowery congratulations with which the musician, standing in the first position and with a low bow between every few words, felt it incumbent upon him to respond to the information. She broke down at last with many hot blushes, warned in time by the increasing twinkle of amusement in Lord Carleton's eyes.

His pretty speeches over, Signor Moroni proceeded promptly to business.

"I thought," he said, with a simple kindness, not altogether free from embarrassment, "that the signorina might perhaps be a little lonely. I came to beg her to accept of my poor hospitality, and to honour my roof with her presence, if only for a time. My sister is with me, and will do her best, I know, to make the signorina comfortable. And in a few days, my niece, Teresa, and her husband will be coming to visit us. There could be no greater joy for Teresa than to find the signorina there when she arrives."

Benedetta took the old man's hand in hers for a moment.

"How kind, how very kind you are to me!" she said; adding after a short pause, "I should like to come."

And turning to Beresford, she once more acted as interpreter.

"Yes, go," he said; "you are quite right. I suppose I may not come too?"

And so it was settled. And the very next day, Benedetta put together her small amount of luggage, and bidding farewell to Signora Scalchi, walked for the last time down the corridor of the old Palazzo; then, descending the stairs in company with her courteous old host, proceeded to his house, there to take up her quarters for an uncertain time.

The uncertain time, however, proved shorter than was expected. To one in Benedetta's position, without home, occupation, or ties, all the circumstances of life seemed to add force to Beresford's demand for an early marriage.

Certainly, Lord Carleton was a most audacious and persevering lover. He

pleaded his own constancy, their long separation, Detta's loneliness, as so many reasonable grounds for a concession to his wishes; and when he found that, with all her affection for him, yet that she shrank shyly from his proposal of only a fortnight's delay—then, with a machiavellian guile, he declared his health threatened by the dangerous climate of a Roman autumn, and so worked upon her alarmed feelings as to resolve opposition into instant and terrified submission.

And so, almost before Eveleen and her mother had had time to write their congratulatory letters, or to realise the astonishing triple fact that Beresford had returned from the Cape, that Beresford had become Lord Carleton, and that Beresford was engaged to their half-foreign relative, the two were married without fuss or ceremony whatever, and emigrated for a couple of days' visit to the picturesque neighbourhood of Tivoli. Then they set their faces towards England, in order, as Beresford said, that his wife might at once undertake the new cares and responsibilities of a woman of property.

“Shall we live at Steynton, love?” he had asked. “Or would you,” he demanded gravely, “prefer a lodging in Whitechapel, whence we might watch the erection of the new Model Lodging Houses?”

Before leaving the land of her birth, however, Benedetta, accompanied by her husband, paid one or two farewell visits. Living friends in Rome were few, old Moroni and his niece being her only intimate acquaintances. But two friends there were, both under ground, to whose graves she must say a last good-bye before she returned northwards. One was that of an old man who had been ripe for the sickle, worn and weary, when he went to his long rest. The other that of a young man in his prime of life—noble of purpose, talented and beautiful—the victim of treachery. The two had been equally dear to her. And now that the voices of both were hushed, and that the living influences of both were merged into but a pathetic memory, the old city felt no longer home of hers.

Beresford kept silence, as in turn she visited each grave, heaping upon it her garlands of rare, sweet flowers—for the moment so recalled into the vanished past as even to forget his presence. When, at length she returned to his side, her eyes were full of tears; and he put his arm around her.

“I wish the crosses had been up before we left Rome,” she said: “I should like to have seen them. Oh, Beresford, I feel as if all my girlhood had left me with those two. They were very dear to me.”

“They are sacred to me, too, my Piccola, if only because of their love to you. Without that noble fellow,” and he pointed towards Ino’s grave, “I might perhaps, never have found my way to you, dear. We might have missed each other at last—who knows?”

THE END.





